Swedish Dialogue Institute
for the Middle East and North Africa

Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation

Workshop on intergenerational partnerships to deliver on the Youth, Peace and Security agenda in the MENA region

18 January 2021
13.00-16.00 CET
Zoom

Summary Report

With the adoption in 2015 of UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) and follow-up resolutions 2419 (2018) and 2535 (2020) – referred to as the Youth, Peace and Security agenda – there is greater recognition at the global policy level of the vital role of young people in building peace and preventing and resolving violence and armed conflict. Yet, much more is needed to ensure the resolution's implementation and young people's meaningful engagement in decision making. Young people continue to be engaged by decision makers in a tokenistic manner, to fill a 'youth' seat. They face systemic barriers to participation, including the lack of access to quality education and employment, and operate in contexts where civic space is shrinking. There is still a lack of concerted effort to reach out to diverse young people, including those most vulnerable to exclusion such as young women. Importantly, young people are often not recognised as equal and viable partners in efforts to promote peace and security.

Recognising the need to strengthen meaningful and intergenerational partnerships with and for young people and for their agency to be fully recognised, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa and the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation organised on 18 January 2021 an interactive workshop on what is needed to foster intergenerational collaboration and partnerships to deliver on the Youth, Peace and Security agenda in the MENA region.

By inviting young peacebuilders and leaders of youth-led organisations from the MENA region, as well as representatives from multilateral and regional organisations (including the United Nations and the European Union), governments and other stakeholders, the workshop aimed to provide a platform for intergenerational exchange. The workshop sought in particular to amplify the voices of young peacebuilders on how they envision meaningful partnerships to be created in the years to come and explore how existing alliances can play an instrumental role in facilitating these partnerships. The following provides a summary of the discussion (for a summary of participant reflections of the discussions see Annex).

Introduction

Recognising the 'important and positive contribution of youth in efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security', the YPS agenda outlines *partnerships* as one of its five core pillars (the other four of which are *participation, protection, prevention, and disengagement and reintegration)*. This pillar underscores the need for collaboration, including with young people themselves, to advance the agenda.

Participants highlighted that intergenerational partnerships are an important step in building trust between young people and decision makers and for the latter to show solidarity with young people as true and equal partners (see Figure 1). Participants highlighted the need to move away from a siloed approach, in which young people occupy their own spaces with decision makers and the wider community operating in separate spaces. Young participants highlighted that they are already taking on the responsibility to promote sustainable peace, building on the work of previous generations. Partnerships and dialogue are therefore critical to fostering learning and exchange between generations of peacebuilders.

Yet, more dialogue and learning is needed to advance intergenerational partnerships and collaboration. Discussions highlighted that true intergenerational partnerships that embrace youth as co-leaders remain rare and identified particular barriers to fostering intergenerational collaboration.

Figure 1: How do you define intergenerational partnerships?

Barriers to creating meaningful intergenerational partnerships

Young people lack safe spaces to openly share their opinions, organise and create partnerhsips. Civic spaces in the region are under threat. There are examples of individuals who were involved in the Arab uprisings in 2010-2011 being banned from travel, arrested and/or tortured. Many young people in the region do not participate in advocacy for fear of reprisal and the risk of incurring physical and psychological harm. Therefore, the UN and other multilateral actors, as well as governments, should prioritise actions to promote and expand civic space and create safe spaces for dialogue on politics, democracy, peace and other issues.

Efforts to engage youth remain tokenistic. Young participants shared that the international community and national and local civil society actors often come to young people with a set agenda, rather than listening to what youth themselves want and involving them in planning processes. When young people are given a seat at the table, it is often to fill a youth seat, without giving them the agency to idependently express opinions. The engagement of youth often takes place through one-off initiatives and lack long-term follow up. There is also a tendency to reach out to elite youth (typically educated, those who speak English) rather than making a concerted effort to also engage young people with diverse backgrounds. Some participants pointed, for example, to large events held in capitals as only serving to promote an environment in which youth feel that they have to know of the latest UN resolutions and understand and use technical jargon to be able to engage on these issues. The international community and governments should consider ways to better support dialogue initiatives in communities, building on local efforts, and connect work at the grassroots level with policy discussions and processes.

Polices that affect youth are often adopted without consulting young people. Some youth in the region view resolution 2250 as a top-down agenda and its implementation something that is pushed onto youth by the international community without meaningfully engaging young people in a conversation on their needs and priorities.

Harmful narratives of youth as either victims or perpetrators of violence persist. Decision makers often adopt policies and develop programming aimed at engaging youth with the aim to prevent their joining violent extremist groups rather than with the intention to promote their meaningful engagement.

> **Youth perspectives on peace**
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> The concept of *peace* was raised throughout the discussion, with participants underscoring that there is not a common understanding or vision of what *peace* means for a country and for the region as a whole. In some contexts, for example, the word peace is associated with normalisation of the status quo. In others, peace is deemed a radical term, where association to peace work can pose danger or risk of retaliation to young people engaging in peacebuilding. Young people in particular tend to have different ideas from older generations of what peace should look like, with many youth in the MENA region viewing peacebuilding as something that is imagined or that is only attainable in a perfect world.
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> It it ***therefore vital that youth are part of the conversation*** in conceptualising what peace at the country and the regional levels should look like. The international community should take the time to explain to young people what it means by peace when referring to *youth, peace and security* and be prepared to listen to youth perspectives on peace that may differ from the global normative understanding.

Young people often face structural barriers to being able to participate in dialogue and partnerships with other actors. Youth may face travel restrictions within their country, in the region and internationally. Young people are often required to pay for travel and accomodation that make their participation possible out of their own pocket, with many lacking the funds to be able to participate. Young people who are invited to international conferences often face difficulties in getting visas due to stringent application processes.

Strengthening intergenerational collaboration and partnerships

Participants highlighted a number of ways that the United Nations, international non-governmental organisations, governments and civil society can strengthen collaboration and partnerships with youth and youth initiatives.

Be an ally to young people. As is underscored in the 2020 Security Council Resolution 2535 on YPS, ensuring the meaningful participation of youth requires the international community to protect and advocate for safe civic and political spaces in which youth can speak up, voice their opinions and create partnerhips. The UN and bilateral donors in particular have an important role to play in holding governments accountable for human rights violations and implementation of global normative frameworks.

Establish equal partnerships that aim to listen to and learn from youth. When seeking to engage young people, innovative solutions that seek to develop and build on a shared understanding of youth participation are critical. For example, there have been efforts under the COVID-19 pandemic to hold consultations with youth via online platforms. It is, however, important to ensure that online platforms remain safe spaces for exchange. Online solutions are also not necessarily more inclusive, as some youth do not have access to internet.

A greater effort should be taken to meet youth in their own spaces in addition to inviting them to provide their reflections in policy fora and in high-level conferences. For example, the YPS coalition in Iraq, co-chaired by youth initiatives, works to create direct partnerships with youth-led organisations, providing a safe zone for youth to explain what they want out of the coalition.

Establish inclusive and institutionalised communication channels with youth and other stakeholders on the YPS agenda. There is a lack of knowledge among governments and commmunities on resolutions 2250, 2419 and 2535. The international community, and especially the UN, can play an important role in sharing the main messages of the YPS agenda with governments and young people. The UN, international non-governmental organisations and governments should be better at sharing information with young people, including on various policies; how to access funding; who to reach out to with questions; and how to meaningfully advocate and hold decision-makers accountable. Communication channels should also allow young people to reach out to decision makers and share their perspectives.

Develop innovative funding mechanisms that are accessible to young people and youth initiatives. Long-term and core funding would allow youth initiatives to strengthen their own capacities and develop partnerships across generations. Funding should be flexible and come with less strict reporting requirements. Considering that young people engage in both formal and informal spaces, the donor community should consider ways to also support local and more informal youth initiatives. Donors should ensure that their programmes are both youth- and conflict-sensitive, and that young people contribute in setting priorities in programming and the formation of national and regional strategies.

Reach out beyond the usual suspects. Efforts should be made to reach out to diverse young people, including from different regions of a country as well as different socio-economic backgrounds. The international community should consider ways that this kind of outreach can

be accomplished through direct engagement, as well as indirect modes of outreach through, for example, supporting local and regional actors to build and diversify their constituencies and networks.

Build the capacity of young people and governments. The international community can play an important role in advancing the YPS agenda in the MENA region by working with youth to develop their skills, in particular on how build partnerships. Equally important is to build the capacities of governments and local institutions to engage with and include young people. This includes ensuring principles and working methods that are youth-sensitive and inclusive, and by integrating the principles of the YPS agenda in programming cycles.

Moving forward to advance the YPS agenda

The workshop underscored that young people want to engage in dialogue across generations and are keen to share and learn from others. Having a space for true dialogue between youth, decision makers and civil society is critical to advancing the YPS agenda and to advancing social cohesion in the region. When looking at the space for dialogue, it is also imperative to look outside of more traditional actors (government, civil society, UN), for example within the private sector.

The discussions also highlighted that when it comes to implemention of the YPS agenda, a lot of learning can be applied from experiences of advancing the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and the Sustaining Peace resolutions in the region. One such lesson mentioned was that administrative and funding mechanisms that require detailed and often burdensome reporting often do not lead to the best results. To ensure implementation of the WPS agenda, it was also necessary to develop regional frameworks for implementation, ensuring that the resolutions resonated in specific geographic contexts, and to incorporaate a WPS perspective in country reports to the Security Council. Similar strategies could be applied in advancing the YPS agenda. It would also be useful to learn how intergenerational dialogues have been used to advance the WPS agenda.

While there is recognition by global leaders of the importance of young people's involvement, more work is needed to translate that recognition into practice and into opportunities for young people, activists and peacebuilders to be able in a safe way to engage, to share ideas and to feel their voices are heard and influence decision-making. A key message from participants was that the international community needs to walk the talk, and move from policy discussions to real implementaion.

Annex: Participant reflections on what stood out from the breakout group presentations

What is peace?

Need to build the capacity on non-Youth

Youth becoming regarded as elitist by other youth when they participate in YPS platforms

Important issue about how youth can and should be engaged after having received training and capacity building.

Need to create safe spaces and ensure the protection of youth partners - but how?

How to get the older generation at the national level more aware and receptive key going forward

We need to stop abusing the word "Inclusion of Youth" and take serious measure to achieve it

Move beyond tokenism. Walk the talk. Importance of going beyond silos.

Different understandings of peace, the risk that young people face when engaging with 'peace'

Many mouvements emerged but not so many learning happened , we need to have common channels to share so we can build on them.

Different understanding of peace among different groups

Idea of a Regional YPS Framework

How to identify beyond usual suspects?

Learning and exchange moving in all directions. Connecting YPS to country specifics.

That decision makers need to lern how to engage in dilogue woth Youth

Structural barriers to inclusive participation - elitist vs broader representation

Coordination mechanism at regional level

The need for intergenerational communicationThe make an effort to find youth outside of the usual channels of communication

There is a common problem in the MENA region, which is the systematic exclusivity of youth in national dialogue and building the national agendas. There is a need to build youth leadership and just capacity.

Need to meet youth in spaces where they are already having dialogue

What stood out is the idea that the lack of accessibility towards a larger audience, especially from youth actors, is still a prevailing issue in many examples. Access is crucial to have a diversified scenery of opinion among other potentials.

young people shouldnt act on their personal intersts only but collective interests

I think an important point that emanates from most comments and presentations is the importance of protection in a context of shrinking public space, in the MENA and elsewhere. This makes peacebuilding a really difficult and risky endeavour.

the need to continue raising awareness on 2250 among both youth groups and decision makers

Starting on the local level - inclusion of youth in decision making at municipality level