



Discussion Paper

Engaging, Supporting, and Empowering Global Youth

Independent Commission on Multilateralism

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Introduction

Every generation looks to the next as a source of hope and change. History has taught us that, without including young people, individual states—and, consequently, the multilateral system as a whole—face a growing crisis of credibility and legitimacy.¹ While the youth demographic continues to gain influence, particularly in developing countries, which account for close to 90 percent of the global youth population, youth remain heavily underrepresented in the policymaking sphere internationally.²

This lack of representation in policymaking, compounded by the reality or perception that their interests are ignored or overlooked, has fueled young people’s discontent and mistrust of national governments and, by extension, the multilateral system. In order to be embraced by more young people globally, this multilateral system will need to include more youth voices in its traditional top-down structures and policymaking processes. This could include creating more youth leadership positions in national and international structures; developing consultative and participatory frameworks designed for, and ideally by, youth; and systematically including youth-based associations and networks as stakeholders.³

Broadly speaking, youth face certain universal challenges. The 2014 Global Youth Wellbeing Index revealed that youth face a global crisis of overall well-being and feel excluded from economic opportunities and spheres of power.⁴ This is reflected in the highest global youth unemployment rate in history, at 12.7 percent.⁵ Widening disparity between social classes, higher unemployment rates, and increasing economic instability create additional social, economic, and political strains.⁶

Failure on the part of national, regional, and global entities to offer youth equal opportunities forces or results in young people creating platforms for themselves. This dynamic progression has both negative and positive ramifications. By empowering youth to transcend the boundaries of traditional “youth” platforms and create a larger space to participate in the very foundations of the multilateral system, the international community can shape a world that is inclusive of and beneficial for all.

¹ Youth defined as 10–24 years old. Lyndsay McLean Hilker and Erika Fraser, “Youth Exclusion, Violence, Conflict and Fragile States,” DFID Equity and Rights Team, 2009, available at www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/CON66.pdf.

² UN Economic and Social Council, “Background Note to Youth Forum 2015,” 2015, available at http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/youth2015/pdf/background_note.pdf.

³ Rachel Nugent, “Youth in a Global World,” Population Reference Bureau, 2005, available at www.prb.org/pdf06/YouthInAGlobalWorld.pdf.

⁴ Nicole Goldin et al., *The Global Youth Wellbeing Index* (Center for Strategic and International Studies and International Youth Foundation, 2004), available at www.youthindex.org/reports/globalyouthwellbeingindex.pdf.

⁵ Suzie Boss, “A Call to Action: Challenges Facing Global Youth,” Edutopia, March 28, 2012, available at www.edutopia.org/blog/global-education-youth-challenges-suzie-boss.

⁶ Goldin et al., *The Global Youth Wellbeing Index*.

This paper seeks to outline and explore the challenges faced by youth globally while putting forth recommendations on ways in which the multilateral system can better support, engage, and empower youth, particularly by increasing youth participation in multilateral decision making.

I. Who Are the “Youth” and Why Does It Matter?

This paper will use the UN definition of youth as “those persons between the ages of 15–24 years.”⁷ It is necessary, however, to acknowledge that various definitions exist in order to understand the implications and limitations of existing national and global policies and frameworks.⁸

Beyond determining basic age parameters, acknowledging the deficiencies in defining “youth” from a gender perspective is important. In many regions, youth initiatives and platforms remain dominated by young men due to the cultural and social definition of youth. For example, girls in large parts of Africa, Western Asia, and the Middle East experience youth very briefly between the onset of puberty, marriage, and motherhood, whereas in many urban settings, marriage is not a limiting factor, and poor women, even if they bear children, are considered youth much longer.⁹ These distinctions have significant implications for the treatment of young women, often reinforcing the lack of investment in girls’ education and economic opportunities.¹⁰ With fewer such opportunities, young women make up the bulk of the informal, unpaid labor force.¹¹ Different approaches must be examined to ensure increased inclusion of young women in the multilateral system.

At the most basic level, youth as a complex, heterogeneous group is important because 48 percent of the world’s population is under the age of 24. This presents a clear demographic and democratic imperative for their further inclusion and meaningful participation in policymaking circles at the national and international levels.

Further, studies have demonstrated that youth need to be involved in formulating political and social policies and policy frameworks in order to trust those policies fully.¹² Youth involvement

⁷ UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Definition of Youth,” n.d., available at www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf.

⁸ For example, in South Africa, “youth” is defined as anyone between the ages of 14 and 35 in order to “embrace varied categories of the youth, which have been exposed to different socio-political and historical experiences.” This is similar to definitions in Latin America and Southeast Asia, where youth is understood on the basis of historical influences and the resulting sociopolitical environment. South African Regional Poverty Network, “Youth Voluntarism in South Africa,” 2008, available at www.sarprn.org/CountryPovertyPapers/SouthAfrica/june2002/mkandawire/page3.php.

⁹ Karen Tranberg Hansen et al., *Youth and the City in the Global South* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ International Labour Organization, “Youth Employment: Breaking Gender Barriers for Young Women and Men,” 2008, available at www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/publication/wcms_097919.pdf.

¹¹ Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

¹² Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum, “Cross-regional Trends & Impact in the Middle East and North Africa: The Youth Dimension,” 2015.

also ensures that policies that have an impact on youth include their first-hand input and, as a result, actually address their concerns. Moreover, there is a strong relationship between political engagement at the national and international levels, because national political structures provide a clear route to global institutions.¹³

There is also a link between economic empowerment of youth and their international engagement. Many youth feel they must be involved in the economic development of their local economies before engaging internationally. Most youth, however, have limited avenues for participation in their countries' economic development, and there is evidence that, in times of economic distress, youth are the last to be considered for job opportunities and the first to be let go, often leading to higher youth unemployment.¹⁴ These economic impediments curtail youths' ability to engage actively at both the national and international levels.

II. Youth Contributions and the Digital Age

Youth have transformed global politics, economics, and societies, even if not through the formal multilateral system. Many of their contributions have been spurred by the explicit exclusion of youth from formal processes or in protest against the existing political and power structures. Politically, young people such as Malala Yousafzai and Joshua Wong have stood up to tyrannical groups and repressive governments and urged others to do the same. Young people are making unparalleled strides in science and medicine, such as eighteen-year-old Brittany Wenger, who created a less invasive way to diagnose breast cancer, and fifteen-year-old Jacob Barnett, whose discoveries at the age of nine expanded Einstein's Theory of Relativity.¹⁵

In recent years, access to information and communication technology (ICT) has transformed global politics. Modern information technology and the expansive, unmediated nature of online communications have leveled hierarchies and enabled youth to interact without deference to—and sometimes in defiance of—authority. From the invention of Google by then 23- and 24-year-olds Larry Page and Sergey Brin to the creation of the virtual, horizontal platform Facebook by then 19-year-old Mark Zuckerberg, youth have transformed the world and proven to be “great equalizers,” allowing average citizens to influence global policy, even without formal positions.¹⁶

¹³ World Conference on Youth, “Inclusive Youth Participation at all Levels,” 2014, available at http://wcy2014.com/pdf/f2-issue-brief_youth-participation_final.pdf.

¹⁴ Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum, “Cross-regional Trends & Impact in the Middle East and North Africa: The Youth Dimension”; M. French, S. Bhattacharya, and C. Olenik, “Youth Engagement in Development: Effective Approaches and Action-Oriented Recommendations for the Field,” Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2014, available at <http://ncfy.acf.hhs.gov/library/2014/youth-engagement-development-effective-approaches-and-action-oriented-recommendations>.

¹⁵ Alex Matsuo, “Top 10 under 20: 10 Teenagers Who Changed the World in 2013,” *The Richest*, January 1, 2014, available at www.therichest.com/rich-list/most-influential/top-10-under-20-10-teenagers-who-changed-the-world-in-2013/10/.

¹⁶ Kurt Wagner, “8 Ways Facebook Changed the World,” *Mashable*, February 4, 2014, available at <http://mashable.com/2014/02/04/facebook-changed-the-world/>.

Online platforms also provide a space to tackle the world's most pressing issues. Sites such as Botangle, founded by 18-year-old Erik Finman, and Khan Academy, “the largest school in the world,” founded by then 25-year-old Salman Khan, cater to the education of children and youth and are reinventing education globally.¹⁷ Google's global science competition led to the discovery of Diazotroph, a bacterium that transfers nitrogen from the atmosphere to soil and increases the yield of crops, by three sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds, Ciara Judge, Emer Hickey, and Sophie Healy-Throw.¹⁸ These individual projects, embraced by the multilateral system after their proven success, have yet to drive the multilateral system to systemically prioritize greater youth innovation and participation.

The Internet, as widely noted, has also proven to be a game-changer in government transparency. Groups like WikiLeaks, launched in 2007 by a group of youth to normatively promote global transparency and accountability, have published classified documents that expose torture and corruption and have unequivocally transformed international politics and the media.¹⁹ Their profound impact has inspired youth internationally to seek accountability and transparency.

Ultimately, groups like WikiLeaks, Anonymous, and other global “hacktivist” groups speak to both the idealism and the exclusion of young people, giving youth access to conversations and spaces they have traditionally been excluded from and providing platforms and communities for them to change the status quo.

Much like platforms that embrace political accountability and transparency, youth have also created numerous innovative platforms, such as Cause.org, Change.org, Kickstarter, and Zoomaal, through which they unleash their incredible leadership potential as global citizens to promote or fight for causes they believe in.

The multilateral system, including the UN, has become increasingly aware of the importance of this virtual world and has started using ICT to create spaces for youth engagement. One example is the youth outreach conducted by the UN Secretariat, over the heads of member states, to seek the views of youth on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the "World We Want" campaign.²⁰

While there have been initiatives to provide new spaces for youth, these do not address the underlying exclusion of youth from existing spaces and spheres of power. Youth act as commentators on policies invented for them by others rather than as equal partners and contributors. Greater recognition of youth voices and experiences and greater involvement of

¹⁷ Michael Noer, “One Man, One Computer, 10 Million Students: How Khan Academy Is Reinventing Education,” *Forbes*, November 2, 2012, available at www.forbes.com/sites/michaelnoer/2012/11/02/one-man-one-computer-10-million-students-how-khan-academy-is-reinventing-education/.

¹⁸ Aoife Carr, “Three Irish Students Win Global Science Competition,” *Irish Times*, September 23, 2014, available at www.irishtimes.com/news/technology/three-irish-students-win-global-science-competition-1.1938595.

¹⁹ Amy Goodman, “The World Owes a Debt to WikiLeaks’ Whistleblowing,” *Guardian*, July 6, 2011, available at www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/jul/06/julian-assange-wikileaks.

²⁰ The World We Want, “Dialogues on Implementation of the Post-2015 Development Agenda,” 2015, available at www.worldwewant2015.org/sitemap.

youth in global policy is needed to ensure the continued credibility and relevance of the multilateral system.

III. Youth Engagement: Mapping the Multilateral Landscape

Overall, youth engagement efforts at the national and international levels have been dynamic and multi-stakeholder in nature. Since the 1995 adoption of the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY)—a comprehensive strategy to effectively address the problems of youth and increase opportunities for their participation in society—youth have increasingly been seen as important players in national development and global stability. The UN subsequently reaffirmed its commitment in 2003 through General Assembly Resolution 58/133, which reiterates the “importance of the full and effective participation of youth and youth organizations at the local, national, regional, and international levels in promoting and implementing the World Programme of Action and in evaluating the progress achieved and the obstacles encountered in its implementation.”²¹

Having made youth engagement a priority of his Five-Year Action Agenda, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appointed the first-ever envoy on youth, Ahmad Alhendawi, on January 17, 2013. The envoy on youth is tasked with facilitating and supporting UN multi-stakeholder partnerships related to youth empowerment by promoting mechanisms for youth participation in the UN, improving the channels of communication between young people and the UN, promoting investment in youth development, reinforcing the perspective of youth in relevant resolutions, and promoting leadership of youth at the local, national, and global levels.

More recently, the UN Security Council passed its first-ever resolution on Youth, Peace, and Security (Resolution 2250) in December 2015, the culmination of a multi-year effort to highlight the role and elevate the voices of young people in peacebuilding.²² This resolution stresses the importance of creating inclusive environments for youth to engage in peacebuilding through economic, social, and development activities. It also notes the rise of radicalization among youth as a threat to stability and development and advocates for increased partnership with youth across the UN system.

Since the Security Council adopted Resolution 2250, youth engagement, support, and empowerment have remained at the forefront of international policy-oriented fora in the

²¹ UN Habitat and UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Youth Participation,” n.d., available at www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-participation.pdf.

²² The Amman Youth Declaration on Youth, Peace and Security, which, in part, led to Security Council Resolution 2250, gathered over 400 young people—representatives of youth-led organizations, NGOs, government institutions, and UN entities and experts—to call on governments and NGOs to partner with youth in order to ensure youth participation and leadership in issues of peace and security; to support youth-led anti-violence and anti-extremism initiatives; to create a sustainable framework that addresses gender-specific issues and promotes equality among genders; and to implement policies aimed toward the economic empowerment of young people. The Amman Youth Declaration sought to build on the secretary-general’s 2012 report on “Peacebuilding in the Aftermath of Conflict” to address the “lack of adequate participatory and inclusive mechanisms and opportunities to partner with decision-making bodies.” Available at www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2250%282015%29.

context of peacebuilding and sustainable development. From February 2 to 3, 2016, more than 500 young leaders gathered in New York for the fifth annual United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Youth Forum. This event focused on the role of young people in implementing, communicating, and realizing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.²³ As noted in the formal announcement of the adoption of the 2030 Agenda by the UN General Assembly in 2015, “children and young women and men are critical agents of change” in realizing these goals.²⁴

The ECOSOC Youth Forum also provided a platform for the official launch of a new initiative to tackle youth unemployment, the Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth, which makes clear that success in fighting poverty and inequality will largely depend on youth as a driving force. This initiative aims to generate decent jobs for youth and assist in their transition from school to work.²⁵ It has been described as a “unique partnership with governments, the UN system, businesses, academic institutions, youth organizations and other groups to scale-up action to create new opportunities and avenues for quality employment in the global economy” and “assist young people in developing the skills needed to compete in today’s job market.”

Security Council Resolution 2250 and other developments in the UN represent a positive shift in reframing global peace and security. Despite these commitments and notable steps forward, significant challenges remain, and young people continue to be sidelined in key decision-making arenas. The question then becomes: What is the relationship between youth engagement in the international community and national politics, and how can channels of engagement be strengthened for all young people, regardless of political, racial, or socioeconomic background?

IV. Challenges and Opportunities: Towards a Crosscutting Approach

The multilateral system has primarily dealt with youth as an issue unto itself or, to use a term often cited in the analysis of multilateral structures, as a “silo.” This is an inefficient and ineffective way to capitalize on the potential of youth as positive agents across the multilateral system and hinders the system’s ability to deal with the challenges of the twenty-first century in a systemic and comprehensive way. Instead, the question of youth should be dealt with in a crosscutting fashion that is holistic and integrated across multilateral structures and agencies. This section identifies some of the most salient issues affecting the lives of young people as a basis for putting forward specific recommendations for the multilateral system vis-à-vis youth.

Economic Empowerment

Recently, there has been a revival of the “youth bulge” theory, which originated in the 1970s, particularly in relation to less developed, youth-majority nations. According to this theory, as this generation of youth enters the workforce, it will either help countries move forward by providing demographic “dividends,” or lack of opportunity will increase unemployment rates, leading to more violence and socially destructive acts, particularly by young men. The youth

²³ Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>

²⁴ Available at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=52206#.Vszn-OBkYk>

²⁵ Available at http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_447516/lang--en/index.htm

bulge theory also has implications for young women, as it promotes government control of young people's fertility and reproductive decision making.²⁶

While increased recognition of the negative effects of excluding youth and increased acceptance of the youth bulge theory have encouraged governments to focus on much-needed job creation and economic opportunities for youth, these policy prescriptions are often not based on the fundamental rights of young people. Economic empowerment is a multifaceted concept that includes enhancing job quality (not just quantity), facilitating youth mobility across a number of sectors, and improving access to social protection.

Encouraging and supporting youth entrepreneurship—from building skills to financing and creating synergies between the private and public sectors—is also an important priority. The multilateral system could address two areas in particular: (1) putting in place normative frameworks and policies to foster an environment conducive to creating jobs for young people; and (2) developing rights-respecting legal frameworks to specifically protect economic opportunities for youth and allow youth to exercise their right to employment (and better protect them from exploitation).

The Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth, noted earlier, as well as Goal 8 of the SDGs and the ECOSOC Youth Forum, reveal growing acknowledgment of and momentum behind addressing youth unemployment and developing creative approaches to economic empowerment. Youth inclusion, from economic and educational empowerment to consultative frameworks, could ensure that policies that affect youth include first-hand input and, as a result, actually address youth concerns.

Education

The proven benefits of an educated society, highlighted by Goal 4 of the SDGs, are countless. Historically, the political benefits, such as greater voter awareness and engagement in civic activities, have encouraged governments to promote literacy and education.²⁷ The economic value of increased education across all sections of the population include faster economic growth, greater innovation and flexibility, lower unemployment, higher job satisfaction, higher productivity, and greater individual earnings.²⁸ The social impact—such as greater life expectancy, decreased violence, and healthier and happier citizens who are more invested in their communities—are more difficult to quantify but arguably provide the greatest impetus to invest in education globally.²⁹ Furthermore, access to education has a distinct effect on girls and

²⁶ Rishita Nandigiri, “Standpoint: The Politics of Being “Young”: Is a “Youth” Category Really Necessary for “Development”?” *Feminist Africa* 17 (2012), available at http://agi.ac.za/sites/agi.ac.za/files/9_standpoint_-_the_politics_of_being_young.pdf.

²⁷ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, “Education Indicators in Focus,” 2013, available at [www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/EDIF%202013--N%C2%B010%20\(eng\)--v9%20FINAL%20bis.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/EDIF%202013--N%C2%B010%20(eng)--v9%20FINAL%20bis.pdf).

²⁸ Jack Grove, “Higher Education: It's Good for You (and Society),” *Times Higher Education World University Rankings*, November 2, 2013, available at www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/higher-education-its-good-for-you-and-society/2008681.article.

²⁹ Jere R. Behrman and Nevzer Stacey, eds., *The Social Benefits of Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

young women, who make up two-thirds of the world's 1 billion illiterate individuals, leading to greater individual income, higher national gross domestic product (GDP), higher age of marriage, less spread of fatal disease, and lower maternal and infant mortality.³⁰

Despite the proven benefits of education, most governments have reduced social spending in education and health.³¹ This decrease is most significant in youth-dominated developing countries, where over 98 percent of the world's illiterate population lives.³² The neglect of education in these societies—often void of institutions and policies that prioritize civic engagement of youth—means most youth are not exposed to global issues, limiting their capacity to participate.

In addition, secondary education systems often do not reflect modern societies and economies. There is a strong emphasis on college education, while technical or vocational training receives insufficient attention. For example, according to one survey, 41 percent contemplated suicide due to increased emphasis on education they could not afford. In the United States, federal student loan debts, which exceed 1 trillion dollars, are crippling the economy.³³

Education is also a central part of emergency responses. The Syrian crisis, for example, has disrupted the education of youth both inside Syria and in neighboring countries, but humanitarian programming has not systematically focused on education for youth. There is a need for holistic humanitarian responses that prioritize education and link this education to livelihood opportunities.³⁴

Health

Supporting, promoting, and empowering youth also requires ensuring their access to health services. Many young people, particularly women, suffer from poor health owing to the effects of poverty, underdevelopment, insecurity, war, and occupation, but research and programs to understand and enhance youth health are lacking.

Youth in developing countries facing greater economic hardship, political turmoil, higher unemployment rates, and scant health infrastructure, are most affected by fatal diseases, including those preventable by vaccines.³⁵ HIV/AIDS, the leading cause of death among youth in Africa and the second leading cause of death among youth globally, remains largely unchecked.³⁶ In 2013, 670,000 youth were infected, an all-time high, with the majority in

³⁰ Plan International, "The Facts on Girls' Education," n.d., available at <http://becauseiamagirl.ca/girlseducation>.

³¹ AEGEE-Europe and European Students' Forum, "Position Paper in Youth Participation in Democratic Processes," 2014, available at www.aegge.org/position-paper-in-youth-participation-in-democratic-processes.

³² UN Secretary-General, remarks on launch of Education First Initiative, September 26, 2012, available at <http://www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=6320>.

³³ Institute for College Access & Success, Project on Student Debt, available at <http://ticas.org/posd/home>.

³⁴ Mona Christophersen, "Educating Syrian Youth in Jordan: Holistic Approaches to Emergency Response," International Peace Institute, December 2015.

³⁵ United Nations, "Youth and Health Issues," in *World Youth Report*, 2003, available at <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/nyin/documents/worldyouthreport.pdf>.

³⁶ Tom Odula, "AIDS No. 1 Killer of Adolescents in Africa, Medical Groups Say," *CBC News*, February 17, 2015, available at www.cbc.ca/news/health/aids-no-1-killer-of-adolescents-in-africa-medical-groups-say-1.2960294.

developing countries.³⁷ Furthermore, studies have indicated that, due to depression and stigma, HIV-infected youth may be more susceptible to joining violent outfits where they can gain a form of social acceptance.³⁸

Gender must be taken into consideration when formulating health policies and programs. Despite significant strides made in reproductive and maternal health, young women and girls remain disproportionately affected by lack of access to and poor quality of health services. There is also a need for more accountable and comprehensive approaches to physical and sexual abuse, which greatly increases the rates of infectious diseases and mental illness among young women and girls.³⁹

Mental illness and depression are on the rise and are now the leading causes of illness and disability among youth globally. Studies show that over 75 percent of all people who develop mental illness will have their first symptom by age twenty-four.⁴⁰ As women are 40 percent more susceptible to mental illness according to some studies, and women and girls with mental illness face greater societal stigmatization, any approach to addressing and educating young people and societies must be gender-sensitive.⁴¹

In all countries, whether developing, transitional, or developed, youth health remains inadequately address. Among the health policies of 109 countries reviewed by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2014, only 25 percent addressed mental health. And while 75 percent addressed sexual and reproductive health, policies and services were still viewed as lacking, with the WHO recommending that countries adopt health strategies that address “a broader spectrum of health issues affecting adolescents, including mental health, nutrition, substance use, violence, and non-communicable diseases, in addition to sexual and reproductive health.”⁴² In response to this continuing need, Goals 3, 5, 6, and 10 of the SDGs address health, including access to and inequality of health services.

Political and Social Exclusion

When youth are excluded from formulating and implementing policy, their needs are more likely to be overlooked. The consequences can range from ineffective policy to the current global “epidemic” of youth unemployment. The effects of exclusion are interconnected and

³⁷ UNICEF, HIV/AIDS Data, available at <http://data.unicef.org/hiv-aids/adolescents-young-people>.

³⁸ Elizabeth Saewyc and Bonnie Bea Miller, “Beyond Vulnerability: Breaking the Link between Violence and HIV Risk for Young People,” CATIE, 2013, available at www.catie.ca/en/pif/spring-2013/beyond-vulnerability-breaking-link-between-violence-and-hiv-risk-young-people.

³⁹ World Health Organization, “Sexual Violence,” in *Global Campaign for Violence Prevention*, 2014, available at www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/global_campaign/en/chap6.pdf.

⁴⁰ National Institute of Mental Health, “Mental Illness Exacts Heavy Toll, Beginning in Youth,” June 6, 2005, available at www.nimh.nih.gov/news/science-news/2005/mental-illness-exacts-heavy-toll-beginning-in-youth.shtml.

⁴¹ James Ball, “Women 40% More Likely than Men to Develop Mental Illness, Study Finds,” *The Guardian*, May 22, 2013, available at www.theguardian.com/society/2013/may/22/women-men-mental-illness-study.

⁴² World Health Organization, “WHO Calls for Stronger Focus on Adolescent Health,” May 14, 2014, available at www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2014/focus-adolescent-health/en/.

context-specific. Structural factors that lead to exclusion vary from one society to another, as different societies are subject to the influence of different economic and social practices. In addition to the economic exclusion discussed above, types of youth exclusion can include:

- Political exclusion: lack of participation in decision making and policy formulation
- Social exclusion: denial of access to essential services, such as health, education, or housing
- Cultural exclusion: discrimination, lack of identity, or lack of dignity

Leaders around the world have not created the infrastructure needed for greater youth involvement.⁴³ As noted by author Miller Clearly, “Funding agencies are not without their agendas, and government entities and economic powers are apt to want to perpetuate the policies that might make them look good or that maintain power.”⁴⁴ In situations of authoritarian leadership, the potential for formal political engagement is especially limited, as these leaders often groom family members to succeed them. This is particularly widespread in less developed countries, where most governing classes are family dynasties, and political influence is tied to economic supremacy. In response, Goal 16 of the SDGs speaks strongly and specifically to the need to promote just, peaceful, and inclusive societies.

In the formal political arena, factors such as exclusionary age requirements, lack of financial assets, and demands for previous political experience create obstacles to youth participation. For example, in the United States, where politics are increasingly privatized, it can take more than \$10.3 million to win a senatorial race—a sum beyond the reach of most youth.⁴⁵ In most jurisdictions, eligibility to contest elections for the national legislature begins at 25 years of age. Globally, only 1.65 percent of political representatives are in their 20s, and only 11.87 percent are in their 30s; most are in their 50s.⁴⁶

Additionally, many governments view youth groups or youth appointed to political bodies as political threats and curtail their access to international funding. In these contexts, youth may be unable to advance their initiatives through rallies or other political avenues due to fear of persecution or arrest.⁴⁷ Many governments also curtail freedom of speech, which most youth view as integral to achieving full international participation.⁴⁸

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Linda Miller Clearly, *Cross-cultural Research with Integrity: Collected Wisdom from Researchers in Social Settings* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁴⁵ Paul Steinhauser and Robert Yoon, “Cost to Win Congressional Election Skyrockets,” *CNN*, July 11, 2013, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/07/11/politics/congress-election-costs>.

⁴⁶ Greg Power, *Global Parliamentary Report* (Denmark: UN Development Programme and Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2012), available at www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Democratic%20Governance/Global_Parliamentary_Report_English.pdf.

⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2013*, available at www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/wr2013_web.pdf.

⁴⁸ Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum, “Cross-regional Trends & Impact in the Middle East and North Africa: The Youth Dimension.”

Violence and Crime

At its most severe, the exclusion of youth from policymaking processes and power structures can seriously threaten the social fabric, including through crime and violence. In the worst cases, economic and social factors can create an environment ripe for manipulative leaders to cultivate violent political ideologies among youth or to recruit or force youth without opportunities into national or regional armed conflicts.⁴⁹ These factors can include access to weapons, which provide youth with the technical ability to become involved in violence; a sense of exclusion from political decision making, which can drive youth to form clandestine groups to oppose an oppressive regime or tyrannical government through violent demonstrations or campaigns; and opportunity for financial gain, particularly for youth who are economically marginalized.⁵⁰ Moreover, when youth feel pressured to become violent, they may lose their identity in society, which in turn can cause negative prejudices, aggression, or depression.⁵¹

As a result of this relationship between youth and violence, youth are often viewed as “potential perpetrators of violence despite the fact that most young people are not involved in armed conflict or violence.”⁵² This perception hinders the inclusion of young people as partners in peace and undermines existing efforts to involve youth in peacebuilding. Effectively addressing youth exclusion requires moving beyond the perpetrator-victim dichotomy and beyond security-focused policies toward policies that empower and include youth.

Media and Speech

Many media outlets, particularly traditional outlets, are state-controlled; according to a 2013 study, governments partly control most media outlets in Africa and the Middle East.⁵³ These outlets often promote sectarian or partisan messages and cannot or will not air activities conducted by youth that challenge the government. In addition, financing traditional media campaigns has proven to be a challenge for youth groups.

As a result, many youth instead opt for Internet platforms, which have given them additional avenues for political communication and organization. The influence of Facebook, for example, was apparent in the 2008 US presidential election, when Barack Obama used online platforms to connect with young voters. Facebook has also been heavily cited as an important tool for protesters in the 2011 uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria. It provided them a space to communicate with relative anonymity and security and served as a lens into the conflict for international media and policymakers.

⁴⁹ Machel Waikenda, “Yes, to Mainstreaming Youths into Politics and Economy,” *CapitalFM*, October 20, 2013, available at www.capitalfm.co.ke/eblog/2013/10/20/yes-to-mainstreaming-youths-into-politics-and-economy/.

⁵⁰ Hilker and Fraser, “Youth Exclusion, Violence, Conflict and Fragile States.”

⁵¹ Frances Stewart, ed., *Horizontal Inequalities and Conflict: Understanding Group Violence in Multiethnic Societies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁵² Amman Youth Declaration on Youth, Peace and Security, August 22, 2015.

⁵³ Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press 2013*, available at www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FOTP%202013%20Full%20Report.pdf

Facebook has also spurred the creation of other social media platforms, such as Twitter and Instagram, which have given youth still greater access to policymakers. These platforms enable young people to organize into networks and engage on issues of concern to them and their societies without waiting for member states or the multilateral system to create space for them. The uniquely direct link between user and audience online makes these platforms especially powerful—youth voices online cannot be stifled by bureaucracy or moderated by regulatory bodies. Given the exponential growth of the Internet’s influence on public economics, politics, and culture, it can be argued that the Internet has become the most influential medium in the public sphere, and it is disproportionately used by global youth.⁵⁴

As with any influential public medium, the Internet has positive and negative effects: it provides a platform for individual viewpoints and amplifies the voices of youth, but it also limits accountability and facilitates distribution of messages of intolerance and hate. Transnational violent non-state actors, such as the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) and Boko Haram, have used the Internet to tap into the grievances of excluded youth and connect with other transnational networks seeking profit or power.⁵⁵

Access to the Internet also poses a challenge, as it is not distributed equally within or between countries.⁵⁶ With only 32 percent of Internet users in the developing world, access depends largely on financial ability, geography, and government will.⁵⁷ However, access can be increased through effective policy responses, as in Pakistan, where an aggressive ICT strategy aimed at economic growth boosted Internet usage from 0.1 percent of the population in 2000 to 17.6 percent only eleven years later.

The Internet is not the ultimate solution to engaging youth—online activity does not translate directly into the real-world multilateral system. The Internet may allow youth to make themselves heard online, but it remains overlooked by policymakers and governments.

Geographic Proximity

For the most part, it is easier for youth to participate in local mechanisms than international ones, which involve complex physical, political, and financial dynamics.⁵⁸ Furthermore, from the perspective of youth, local or regional mechanisms and initiatives have a more immediate

⁵⁴ OpenMind, *Ch@nge: 19 Key Essays on How Internet is Changing Our Lives*, 2013, available at www.bbvaopenmind.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/BBVA-OpenMind-book-Change-19-key-essays-on-how-internet-is-changing-our-lives-Technology-Internet-Innovation.pdf.

⁵⁵ Adeline Hulin and Mike Stone, eds., *The Online Media Self-Regulation Guidebook* (Vienna: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2013), available at www.osce.org/fom/99560?download=true.

⁵⁶ Amir Hatem Ali, “The Power of Social Media in Developing Nations: New Tools for Closing the Global Digital Divide and Beyond,” *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 24. No. 1 (2009), available at <http://harvardhrj.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/185-220.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Salvador Rodriguez, “60% of World's Population still Won't Have Internet by the End of 2014,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 2014, available at www.latimes.com/business/technology/la-fi-tn-60-world-population-3-billion-internet-2014-20140507-story.html.

⁵⁸ AEGEE-Europe and European Students' Forum, “Position Paper in Youth Participation in Democratic Processes.”

impact than international engagement and can be the most effective channels to the international policy arena.

Regional mechanisms, in particular, could be an effective channel to the international level. Youth view regional economic integration as essential to their participation.⁵⁹ Such integration could enable youth to share and connect at a regional level, thus enhancing their chances of international participation. Yet bureaucratic barriers, such as high interest rates, lack of business loans, and long business registration procedures, limit economic engagement and entrepreneurial space, both nationally and regionally.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has sought to highlight structural factors that suppress youth empowerment and the ability of youth to participate more fully in the multilateral system. The UN has resources, monetary and otherwise, and unrivalled convening power that it could use to institute frameworks for effective and meaningful youth participation across the system and through the Office of the Youth Envoy. Fully realizing the potential for youth participation requires structural reform and youth involvement in decision making and policy formulation. Young people should not be passive beneficiaries but equal partners in creating and implementing policy, which will increase the legitimacy and ownership of these policies among youth.⁶⁰

1. Implement structured affirmative action for youth at the UN

- Include relevant youth actors in grant committees to determine the allocation of UN funds, particularly the allocation of a percentage of funding for young people and projects targeting youth. Require donor-funded projects to include quotas for diverse youth representation in their design and implementation—taking age, gender, culture, socioeconomic background, and ethnicity into account.
- Devise an inclusive and equitable process for nominating youth representatives on the basis of topic relevance and local knowledge.
- Seek out youth advisers on an ongoing rather than an ad hoc basis across UN agencies, funds, and the Secretariat to act as relatable and accessible conduits between the UN and youth communities globally.
- Use existing youth platforms more effectively to inform UN entities and member states about youth issues, such as by encouraging the Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development to regularly brief member states in the General Assembly.
- Reexamine the effectiveness and relevance of the youth delegate program and consider reforms, such as basing the youth delegate selection process on open applications, clarifying the role of youth delegates, institutionalizing constituencies, and making reporting back a condition for representation.

⁵⁹ Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum, “Cross-regional Trends & Impact in the Middle East and North Africa: The Youth Dimension.”

⁶⁰ International Labour Organization, “Youth Employment: Breaking Gender Barriers for Young Women and Men.”

- Promote and incentivize paid internships as important building blocks for professional development at the UN (in the field and headquarters) and elsewhere.

2. *Leverage youth for the implementation of the SDGs*

Youth were consulted in developing the SDGs and will undoubtedly be instrumental in implementing them, though a clear and concrete plan of action to this effect has yet to be formulated. A combination of top-down and bottom-up mechanisms should be considered:

- Connect multilateral constituencies representing youth to broader grassroots networks, including through concrete communication with local organizations and programs to reach out to disconnected youth. Appoint UN focal points to communicate with these networks at every step of implementing the 2030 Agenda.
- Facilitate peer-to-peer interactions between young people worldwide to achieve the SDG targets, drawing on the examples of the SDG “youth gateway” and discussions at the World Humanitarian Summit on building a network for emergency response.
- Leverage existing formal and informal local-level youth structures and working groups to maximize efficiency and complementarity.
- Promote youth-led research and knowledge in implementing the SDGs through appropriate agencies—particularly UNICEF, UNDP, and UNESCO—and in coordination with academic institutions and centers of higher learning.
- Create youth analysis frameworks that include specific indicators and tools to monitor implementation of the SDGs.
- Create a space for structured and direct participation for youth in the High-Level Political Forum.
- Incentivize national governments to engage youth on their respective national implementation programs.
- Give the UN regional commissions a bigger role in connecting youth with implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including in supporting a regional youth platform to measure progress on transnational targets.

3. *Adopt normative frameworks to foster a policy environment conducive to job creation for young people*

- Map UN agencies and other intergovernmental organizations to identify where and how each is contributing to youth economic empowerment and mobilizing its comparative advantage.
- Inform and assist member states in creating youth-specific ministries to encourage national leadership on youth-related issues.
- Build regional hubs for empowering and employing youth, as recommended by the African Union’s Agenda 2063, which focuses on using science and technology hubs to link education to the private sector.

- Implement the Global Initiative on Decent Jobs, particularly its targets that address education: making curricula more relevant to the job market, with a focus on matching education to jobs; addressing the skills gaps, especially cross-cutting skills such as leadership, critical thinking, and negotiation; and shifting narratives around vocational training and vocational jobs to make them more viable and attractive as paths forward.
- Create enabling environments for entrepreneurship and space for innovation in more traditional sectors, like manufacturing, agriculture, and textiles/sustainable fashion.
- Coordinate training and investment objectives with the private sector, from small and medium enterprises to larger multinational corporations. Facilitate communication between the UN and the private sector to build and strengthen hybrid value chains.

4. Use targeted messaging and effective communication approaches

- Use social media to analyze the impact of UN campaigns and programs on youth and track youth sentiment and levels of engagement on proposals, including by gathering data on the implementation of the SDGs, sponsoring hack-a-thons, or putting specific challenges out to a community and leveraging organizational influence to give prominence to the resulting proposals (like the World Economic Forum’s Global Shapers program).
- Partner with spokespersons who are relatable to the youth demographic. Build partnerships with social media influencers, rather than with their affiliated organization, responding to a media environment where the authenticity of individuals is often preferred to traditional brands. Pursue social media account takeovers with these partners.
- Disseminate content that encourages dialogue, not monologue, including by provoking feedback and emotion through visuals or the framing of questions.
- Create online spaces for interaction that are heavily facilitated, bringing experts into the conversation. Emphasize producing concrete proposals from youth on UN work and have this feed into formalized UN processes, drawing on the Learn/Do/Engage structure for the Youth Gateway.
- Ensure that every communication campaign has a call to action and provides youth with the tools to solve bigger issues in a collaborative way.

5. Support the implementation of Resolution 2250

- Prevent the narrative around youth in peace and security from focusing on young people as threats or perpetrators of violence. Encourage and incentivize a narrative around young people as peacebuilders and positive agents of change.
- Develop a youth-led framework for preventing violent extremism by engaging the right groups locally and without undermining current efforts and programs by trying to make these groups fit into a specific structure. Include youth in creating counter-narratives against violent extremism, with a focus not only on religion but on a broader set of factors, such as economic factors and perceptions of injustice, as well as on positive

rather than negative messaging. Support youth leaders to develop these narratives in collaboration with faith leaders.

- Reaffirm the importance of protecting young peacebuilders, being careful not to put individuals at risk when giving them space for engagement. Ensure the protection of individuals' identities when they are engaging in sensitive messaging, such as against violent extremism.
- Create regional peacebuilding task forces to assist the work of local youth actors.
- Draw lessons from the successes and shortcomings of the implementation of Resolution 1325.

6. Help develop innovative approaches to education at the national level, working toward a “global citizen” approach

- Integrate the SDGs into formal curricula at the national level, promoting an SDG and self-agency mindset.
- Support and invest in non-formal educational initiatives, such as community-based learning centers/spaces, as well as “second-chance” programming. Consider different types of accreditation to accommodate nontraditional students.
- Support and equip youth to engage in entrepreneurship.
- Leverage community-led initiatives, including actions that make information available and usable by communities, thereby increasing participation, accountability, and agency.
- Address shortcomings through partnerships within and external to the UN system, further integration on implementation, and pooled funding.
- Prioritize literacy and numeracy as key foundations for civic engagement and participation.
- Learn and engage with young people about challenges faced, as demonstrated by UNICEF’s U-Report program.⁶¹

⁶¹ See www.unicef.org/media/media_82583.html.

