

THE YOUTH, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA AND SECURITY SECTOR GOVERNANCE AND REFORM

ABOUT THIS SSR BACKGROUND

This SSR Backgrounder examines the intersection of the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) Agenda with security sector governance and reform (SSG/R) processes. It underscores the significance of youth in peace and security, due both to the vulnerability of people in this age group to violence and their potential as agents of positive change. It also presents the Five Pillars of YPS, which provide a framework for action through participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and disengagement and reintegration, which align closely with the principles of SSG/R. SSR processes can thus facilitate implementation of the YPS Agenda and this Backgrounder outlines various ways security sector actors can contribute to YPS. Finally, it highlights that implementing the YPS Agenda and achieving transformative change in security provision for youth requires collaboration between and among security institutions, governments, civil society, and international organizations.

THIS SSR BACKGROUND

ER ANSWERS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

Who are youth?	2
Why are youth important in peace and security?	2
What is the YPS Agenda?	3
How does good SSG relate to YPS?	4
Why do youth matter to the security sector?	5
How can SSR support the implementation of YPS?	5

ABOUT THIS SERIES

The SSR Backgrounders provide concise introductions to topics and concepts in good security sector governance (SSG) and security sector reform (SSR). The series summarizes current debates, explains key terms and exposes central tensions based on a broad range of international experiences. The SSR Backgrounders do not promote specific models, policies or proposals for good governance or reform but do provide further resources that will allow readers to extend their knowledge on each topic.

The SSR Backgrounders are a resource for security governance and reform stakeholders seeking to understand and also to critically assess current approaches to good SSG and SSR.

DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance is dedicated to improving the security of states and their people within a framework of democratic governance, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and gender equality. Since its founding in 2000, DCAF has contributed to making peace and development more sustainable by assisting partner states, and international actors supporting these states to improve the governance of their security sector through inclusive and participatory reforms. It creates innovative knowledge products, promotes norms and good practices, provides legal and policy advice and supports capacity-building of both state and non-state security sector stakeholders.

DCAF wishes to thank

William McDermott and Taynja Abdel Baghy for research, conceptualization, and authorship. Vincenza Scherrer, Floris De Klerk Wolters, Camilla Arvastson and Gabriela Manea for peer review and comments. Kimberly Storr for copy editing and Petra Gurtner for layout and design.

This SSR Backgrounder is a product of the **International Policy Frameworks Programme** of DCAF's Policy and Research Division.

Series Editor

Gabriela Manea

© DCAF

SSR Backgrounders are available free of charge from www.dcaf.ch

Users may copy and distribute this material provided that DCAF is credited.
Not for commercial use.

To cite this publication

DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance. The Youth, Peace and Security Agenda and Security Sector Governance and Reform. SSR Backgrounder Series. Geneva: DCAF, 2024.

DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance
Maison de la Paix
Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2E
CH-1202 Geneva
Switzerland

✉ info@dcaf.ch
☎ +41 22 730 94 00



www.dcaf.ch

WHO ARE YOUTH?

There is no consensus on precisely who constitutes youth. The wide variety of parameters by which youth is defined around the world sometimes include people as young as 15 or as old as 35. However, the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) Agenda confines the term to people between 18 and 29 years old, and this is the definition used in this Backgrounder. In other words, *youth are not children in this context, but young people transitioning into adulthood.*

Youth make up approximately 20 percent of the global population, but tend to account for far more of the population in developing countries and in those marked by fragility and conflict. This is significant, given that the years of youth are inherently temporary yet highly formative, shaping individual perspectives that have impacts on a macro scale when they manifest in society, both in real time and in the future. That said, youth may be united through age but are not a monolith, and represent a diverse cross-section of any population, with different security needs and expectations.

WHY ARE YOUTH IMPORTANT IN PEACE AND SECURITY?

It was in the 1990s that the role and position of youth in peace and security matters came into focus, as attention was increasingly given to the consequences of conflict on specific groups in society. While children and women were clearly affected in disparate ways, research also found that youth are disproportionately affected by, and involved in, violence and armed conflict. For example, it was discovered that youth living in low-income countries have a 1 in 50 chance of being killed before they reach 31 years of age.

In conflict-affected settings, a majority of soldiers, combatants, and members of armed groups are young men, and so it follows that they also make up the majority of casualties of armed violence. Then again, young women constitute 10 to 30 percent of armed forces and groups, and face a heightened risk of physical and sexual abuse and exploitation. Youth are also highly vulnerable to being drawn into renewed violence in countries emerging from conflict, as they are typically most burdened by social and economic insecurities like high unemployment, a lack of opportunity, family dysfunction, and social exclusion; factors that make them particularly susceptible to violence and crime.

This means that youth are often seen as the main perpetrators of political violence, social unrest, and violent extremism, but they are also the group most exposed to violence, unrest, and terrorism. Nevertheless, youth are strong agents of positive change. Generation after generation, they have been at the center of peace processes and movements for social progress.

WHAT IS THE YPS AGENDA?

In 2015, efforts to increase awareness about the importance of youth in peace and security contexts culminated in United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250, which established the YPS Agenda. This set the foundation for a more intentional inclusion of youth in the extensive work of the United Nations (UN) on international peace and security. Inspired by the success of burgeoning efforts on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), the YPS Agenda similarly seeks to empower and encourage the meaningful participation of a group that has historically been marginalized from matters of peace and security.

The YPS Agenda recognizes that conflict affects youth in a particularly harmful way by disrupting their access to education and economic opportunity, and that this can further undermine long-term peace and reconciliation. It also highlights that youth are often disproportionately represented in the populations of countries affected by conflict, and calls for the greater inclusion of youth in preventing and resolving conflict and in sustaining peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts. Indeed, the Agenda underscores the risks of inadequate inclusion of youth in these efforts and the dangers of youth radicalization that leads to violent extremism and terrorism. Importantly, it introduces a framework to orient work in this area, extending from five pillars (see the Five Pillars of YPS box, below).

Subsequent work on YPS has been aimed at striking a more equitable balance between acknowledging and mitigating the risks that may be posed by youth (“youth as a threat”), and harnessing the energy and innovation that youth bring to building and promoting peace (“youth for peace”). While there are valid concerns that some youth may be radicalized and turn to crime, by placing too much emphasis on this, there is a risk that solutions are designed only to address such a possibility, even though the vast majority of youth never engage in crime or extremism. Therefore, as the YPS Agenda emphasizes, the positive contributions of youth to peace and security must be appreciated and efforts must be made to eliminate barriers that exclude and marginalize youth, such as by increasing access to education, protecting and expanding civic space, and supporting economic opportunities.

The YPS Agenda is not just a set of lofty ambitions, but is intended to compel meaningful change. To that end, states are asked to make commitments and reforms at the national and local levels by formulating national action plans (NAPs) for YPS. At the international level, the UN has also made commitments to enhance its programmatic support to youth, creating new entities within the UN and mainstreaming youth as a priority throughout existing entities. Moreover, the UN has been mandated to work with regional organizations to do the same, and both the African Union (AU) and European Union (EU) have thus developed YPS strategies.

THE FIVE PILLARS OF YPS

The YPS Agenda rests on five pillars, which guide its organization and implementation:

- **Participation** – The inclusive representation and participation of youth in decision-making at all levels should be increased, to better prevent and resolve conflict. *This pillar constitutes the primary focus of the Agenda.*
- **Protection** – Respect for existing international humanitarian and human rights law should be emphasized, and all parties to armed conflict must take necessary measures to protect civilians, including youth, from all forms of violence, just as all states must respect and ensure the human rights of all persons, including youth.
- **Prevention** – An inclusive and enabling environment should be created to facilitate greater contribution by youth to peacebuilding efforts, and to ensure they benefit from economic and social development.
- **Partnerships** – Coordination should be improved among UN bodies, and Member States should increase support to the efforts of local communities and civil society to counter violent extremism.
- **Disengagement & Reintegration** – Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) activities should consider the needs of youth and provide appropriate economic and educational opportunities.

HOW DOES GOOD SSG RELATE TO YPS?

Fundamentally, the YPS Agenda is aimed at making transformative change that will ensure security is delivered equitably to all people, especially youth. This can only be achieved by reforming the way security is currently delivered, and it is security sector governance and reform (SSG/R) models that provide a blueprint for how to do this.

→ For more information on definitions, concepts, and practical guidelines that relate to SSG/R, please see the [SSR Backgrounder on Security Sector Governance](#) and the [SSR Backgrounder on Security Sector Reform](#).

The YPS Agenda is compatible with many goals and principles of SSG, especially participation, responsiveness, effectiveness, accountability, rule of law, and gender equality. Good SSG and the aims of YPS thus intersect in various important ways:

- SSG calls for the active, equitable, and inclusive **participation** of all segments of society, even the most vulnerable and marginalized, in security sector decision-making and in security provision. Likewise, the YPS Agenda prioritizes participation as a critical objective. Yet, young people often distrust that existing institutions and leadership can meet their concerns. SSR can therefore serve as a tool that makes the security sector more responsive to these concerns and others, addressing issues such as inclusion and representation head-on and at all levels of decision-making. For example, youth could be engaged in the process of developing local community policing plans, and their perspectives could be incorporated when formulating national security strategies.
 - SSG calls for increasing the **effectiveness** of the security sector, particularly by improving the quality, professionalism, and transparency of security delivery to all, including youth. In other words, an effective security sector is one in which security institutions deliver a high standard of security, without prejudice. Given that youth are disproportionately likely to be the victims and perpetrators of crime, as noted above, it is clear that security is not currently being delivered effectively to youth.
 - Effectiveness must be complemented by **accountability**, as this is the means by which a high standard of security provision is maintained. Indeed, a security sector that is not accountable simply cannot be effective. When standards are not met, independent authorities tasked with overseeing the sector must be able to impose sanctions, and must do so evenhandedly. Hence, oversight actors, including civil society, parliaments, and ombuds institutions have an important role to play in highlighting any deficiencies in the delivery of security to youth, and in pressing for change.
 - The **responsiveness** of a security sector determines the degree to which institutions are sensitive to the different security needs of all parts of a population, including youth. In a responsive security sector, these institutions can capably assess these different needs while also performing their mission in the spirit of a culture of service. For instance, since youth are more susceptible to being drawn into violence than other groups in society, a responsive security sector should act preventatively vis-à-vis youth, anticipating and mitigating risks by developing tailored programming that meets their specific needs. Responsiveness also demands that the security sector adapt its service delivery to various groups, and when it comes to youth, the sector should consider how to make better use of digital tools for this purpose.
 - **Rule of law** is interwoven with responsiveness. For, when laws and policies are discriminatory, rule of law perpetuates inequalities that may harm youth, and it is through an attitude of responsiveness that this is observed and corrected. Many countries have minimum age requirements for political office holders that unfairly limit the political participation of youth, for example. Measures to improve and strengthen the rule of law should ensure that non-discriminatory policies are adhered to, including with respect to age. And even laws and policies that are not actively discriminatory can be redesigned to actively promote the inclusion and participation of youth, thereby proactively countering inequalities, such as by enacting legal requirements that youth are represented in various security sector processes.
 - **Gender equality** is a matter affecting people of all ages, as it lies at the heart of whether women, men, and people of other genders have equal rights to opportunities and resources, irrespective of the gender or sex with which they were born or with which they identify. In the context of the security sector, this means that all people – of all ages – must have equal opportunity to participate in the provision, management, and oversight of security. As it relates to youth, it implies that the varied security needs of younger women, men, and people of other genders are recognized, and are addressed differently through tailored responses. Gender equality is in fact foundational to good SSG, which can never be achieved if the rights of all people are not respected on an equal basis.
- For more information on gender equality and SSG/R, please see the [SSR Backgrounder on Gender Equality and Good Security Sector Governance](#) and the [SSR Backgrounder on Gender Equality and Security Sector Reform](#).

WHY DO YOUTH MATTER TO THE SECURITY SECTOR?

In every context, youth are tightly intertwined with the security sector, for a variety of reasons. Youth tend to represent a plurality or majority of security sector personnel, for instance, particularly in countries with military conscription. Notably, despite this, youth very rarely serve in senior leadership positions within security institutions, which maintain rigidly hierarchical command structures. As a consequence, youth make up a considerable proportion of security personnel, but are largely marginalized from decision-making processes in the sector. At the same time, youth are more likely than other groups in society to have interacted with the security sector, as perpetrators or victims of crime – including homicides (and homicides by the police) – or because they have paid a bribe to a law enforcement official. In many places, this has resulted in a persistent and deep-seated distrust, or even antagonism, between youth and security actors; though, the dynamics of this ill-will are hardly straightforward given that many security actors are themselves youth.

It should be emphasized that the high incarceration rate of youth, which is far above that of other age groups, is not a reflection of the inherent danger of youth but a manifestation of the systematic exclusion and marginalization experienced by youth in societies across the globe. This is only complicated by the relatively hostile relationship that has developed between youth and security actors, which can erupt in highly problematic ways. For instance, violence and crime perpetrated by young people often brings such a forceful response by the security sector that it leads to wider social unrest. This creates a vicious cycle, which may involve excessive use of force by the police, and in some cases acts of terrorism.

Thus, it must not be lost that youth are crucial agents of change in society, who regularly introduce new and innovative ideas, as well as new conceptions of security. This change is often driven by civil society and political engagement, but when the security needs of youth are not met through these channels, or they are not available, there are many examples throughout history of youth-led movements demanding change, including greater equality, human and civil rights, and peace. In many instances, these movements have led to significant positive transformations, and this incredible transformative potential of youth must not be dismissed. Rather, security actors should embrace this potential, and allow it to guide their sector in ensuring that laws and institutions are adaptive to the needs and expectations of the populations they serve.

Clearly, there is reason to and room to improve the relationship between youth and security actors, to the benefit of both. A security sector that delivers security to all people, especially youth, should be an imperative in every country. This is why the YPS Agenda is so valuable. For, it complements SSR in all the ways noted above, and provides a prominent global platform for promoting and enacting reforms that will meaningfully improve the relationship between youth and the security sector.

HOW CAN SSR SUPPORT THE IMPLEMENTATION OF YPS?

SSR can not only provide a blueprint for how YPS reforms are implemented, but can support the practical implementation of these reforms by contributing to each of the five pillars of the YPS Agenda:

Participation

- As discussed above, participation is an explicit objective of both SSG and YPS. This cannot be separated from the fact that, historically, youth have not been adequately included in service delivery. There is also room for youth to be more involved in SSR processes, which would help achieve the participation ambitions of the YPS Agenda. This would mean prioritizing youth innovations, including digital tools that increase youth participation, and conducting needs assessments to ensure that the perspectives of this age group are heard.
- The degree to which youth participate in matters of peace and security very often lays the groundwork for progress in the other four YPS pillars. In other words, it is a cross-cutting component in efforts to implement those pillars. For example, the greater involvement of youth in DDR processes contributes to both the participation and disengagement and reintegration pillars.

Protection

- The ability of security institutions to deliver security and protect all people, including youth, is linked intrinsically to SSR. Efforts to enhance transparency, accountability, the rule of law, and effectiveness and responsiveness are particularly vital to facilitating the protection of youth, and also achieve the protection aspirations of the YPS Agenda.
- A lack of accountability in the security sector can mean that security institutions fail to protect youth. SSR processes can strengthen security sector oversight mechanisms to ensure that all people, including youth, have their grievances heard and addressed. When youth can access security sector oversight mechanisms, those mechanisms – such as ombuds institutions – are better able to protect youth and ensure that the security sector responds to their needs.

Prevention

- SSR can transform the way that matters of youth, peace, and security are addressed, moving a security sector from a reactive to a preventive approach. By aiming to ensure security as a public service available to all, including marginalized groups such as youth, SSR contributes to preventing violent conflict by addressing the “violence of exclusion” that constitutes a driving factor for engagement in violence, especially for young men.
- The engagement of youth in SSR processes is a prerequisite to more people-centered approaches to security, as it is only by understanding and confronting the root causes of youth grievance that incentives can be created which compel youth to preventatively resolve conflict through peaceful means, such as mediation.

Partnerships

- The partnerships pillar is another cross-cutting pillar. For instance, alliances forged between government entities and youth-led civil society to formulate violence prevention strategies contribute to both the partnerships and the prevention pillars. SSR efforts under other pillars may likewise contribute to enhancing partnerships.
- The goal of SSR to foster cooperation between and among security institutions, oversight actors, civil society, and the public to deliver state and human security to all aligns neatly with the ambitions of the YPS partnerships pillar.
- Entry points for partnerships also exist at the national and local levels, such as through the development of national youth coalitions and NAPs for YPS. Regional and international organizations are also crucial partners in implementing both SSR and YPS.

Disengagement and Reintegration

- DDR and SSR are critical elements of support in post-conflict societies working to end conflict, achieve stability, consolidate peace, and kickstart a recovery. It is therefore imperative that DDR processes, which affect youth more than other age groups, are designed and implemented in close coordination with broader SSR processes.

HOW CAN SPECIFIC SECURITY ACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO YPS?

Security and justice institutions:

- *Internally* – provide a positive working environment for youth by ensuring that younger employees are meaningfully included in designing internal policies and practices, and in external engagement with the public.
- *Externally* – regularly review policies and procedures to ensure they do not unintentionally discriminate against or harm youth, and consult youth-led groups to better understand and adapt to the security needs of youth.

Executive and government ministries:

- Demonstrate leadership by promoting youth perspectives vis-à-vis security matters.
- Commit to and lead a whole-of-government effort to implement a NAP for YPS, including through specific security sector reforms.

Oversight actors:

Ombuds institutions

- Actively reach out to youth, through networks and in communities, to facilitate dialogue on youth grievance.
- Conduct systemic investigations of any practices that discriminate against youth and offer practical corrective recommendations.

Parliaments

- Audit security-related laws to identify legislation with detrimental effects on youth, such as age limits restricting participation, and amend them.

Civil society

- Raise awareness of the YPS Agenda among the public.
- Encourage and amplify the voices of youth-led civil society organizations.
- Advocate for the development of a NAP for YPS, with the involvement of civil society.

Education and academic institutions

- Harness the unique relationship educational institutions and networks have with youth, and the role educational institutions can play in promoting youth perspectives.
- Review educational policies to ensure they are inclusive and do not marginalize youth, to prevent contributing to youth grievance.
- Establish positive relationships with security institutions and other oversight actors with which holistic approaches to youth inclusion can be developed.

International organizations:

- Increase youth programming, including by creating or expanding youth-focused and youth-led structures.
- Engage in “youth mainstreaming” across existing entities and initiatives.
- Continue to promote and evolve the YPS Agenda.

WHAT TO READ NEXT

On Youth, Peace and Security:

- Global Coalition on Youth, Peace, and Security [Implementing the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda at Country-level: A Guide for Public Officials](#)
New York: Office of the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, 2022.
- United Nations and Folke Bernadotte Academy [Youth, Peace and Security: A Programming Handbook](#)
New York, 2021.
- Ali Altiok, Helen Berents, Irena Grizelj, and Siobhán McEvoy-Levy **Youth, Peace, and Security**
in *Routledge Handbook of Peace, Security and Development*, edited by Fen Osler Hampson, Alpaslan Özerdem, and Johathan Kent, Routledge, 2020.
- Erike Tanghøj and João Felipe Scarpelini [Youth, Peace and Security Adviser's Handbook](#)
Stockholm: Folke Bernadotte Academy, 2020.
- Albrecht Schnabel and Anara Tabyshalieva (eds.) **Escaping victimhood: Children, Youth and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding**
United Nations, 2013.

Policy Documents on Youth, Peace and Security:

- United Nations Security Council **Resolutions on Youth, Peace and Security, S/RES/2250 (2015), S/RES/2419 (2018), and S/RES/2535 (2020)**
United Nations, 9 December 2020, 6 June 2018, and 14 July 2020.
- United Nations' Population Fund (UNDP) and Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) [The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security](#)
United Nations, New York, 2018.
- African Union Commission [Continental Framework for Youth, Peace and Security](#)
African Union, Addis Ababa, 2020.
- Council of the European Union [The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 \(2018/C 456/01\)](#)
European Union, Brussels, 26 November 2018.

- European Commission [Youth Action Plan \(YAP\) in EU external action 2022–2027. Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council \(JOIN\(2022\) 53 final\)](#)
European Union, Strasbourg, 4 October 2022.

National Action Plans on Youth, Peace and Security:

- Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development of Nigeria [Nigerian National Action Plan](#)
Abuja, September 2021.
- Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland [Youth, Peace and Security: Finland's National Action Plan 2021-2024](#)
Helsinki, 20 August 2021.

Websites on Youth, Peace and Security:

- United Nations [The Youth, Peace and Security Agenda](#)
- The Global Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security [A guide to GCYPS engagement on the Youth4Peace Platform](#)

On Women Peace and Security:

- Marta Ghittoni, Léa Lehouck, and Megan Bastick [A Security Sector Governance Approach to Women, Peace and Security](#)
in *Gender and Security Toolkit*.
Geneva: DCAF, OSCE/ODIHR, UN Women, 2019.
- Megan Bastick and Daniel de Torres [Implementing the Women, Peace and Security Resolutions in Security Sector Reform \(Tool 13\)](#)
in *Gender and Security Sector Reform Toolkit*, edited by Megan Bastick and Kristin Valasek. Geneva: DCAF, OSCE/ODIHR, UN-INSTRAW, 2010.

MORE DCAF SSR RESOURCES

DCAF publishes a wide variety of tools, handbooks and guidance on all aspects of SSR and good SSG, available free-for-download at www.dcaf.ch

Many resources are also available in languages other than English.

DCAF Geneva Centre
for Security Sector
Governance

**DCAF - Geneva Centre for
Security Sector Governance**

Maison de la Paix
Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2E
CH-1202 Geneva
Switzerland

✉ **info@dcaf.ch**

☎ **+41 22 730 94 00**



www.dcaf.ch
