DCAF Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance

Bridging Youth, Peace, and Security with Security Sector Governance and Reform

Issue paper

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Acknowledgements

This guidance note was developed by DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance at the request of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

DCAF wishes to thank Will McDermott and Taynja Abdel Baghy for authorship, Béatrice Godefroy, Vincenza Scherrer and Floris de Klerk Wolters for review and comments, and Kimberly Storr for copy-editing.

The views expressed are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the organizations involved in this project.

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Introduction

This guidance note aims to provide actors in the fields of Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) and/or security sector governance and reform (SSG/R) with guidance on how these two concepts are mutually compatible and reinforcing.

The YPS Agenda, grounded in four UN Security Council resolutions and supported by successive reports of the Secretary-General, represents a breakthrough recognition that young people are not only beneficiaries of peace but essential partners in achieving it sustainably. The Agenda calls for the full, effective, and meaningful participation of youth in peace and security, the protection of their rights, the creation of enabling environments for their civic engagement, and the promotion of prevention strategies that address root causes of conflict. Still, for the most part, this normative progress has not translated into the operationalization of YPS commitments, with implementation at national and local levels often fragmented or ad hoc. This stands in contrast to SSG/R, now a well-established framework for reforming security institutions toward greater accountability, inclusivity, and effectiveness – objectives that directly overlap with the ambitions of the YPS Agenda.

Integrating YPS into SSG/R processes will not only strengthen youth inclusion but also enhance the quality, legitimacy, and sustainability of security reforms. This guidance note therefore highlights the synergies between YPS and SSG/R and identifies practical programmatic entry points for integration. It also provides recommendations to policymakers, practitioners, and youth stakeholders seeking to advance both agendas.

The compatibility of YPS and SSG/R

The YPS Agenda is aimed at increasing the participation of youth in matters of peace and security, and improving protection and prevention efforts directed at young people. These objectives can only be achieved through reforms to security delivery, for which SSG/R provides a blueprint. At the same time, key documents in the SSG/R policy framework, such as the UN's *Security Sector Reform: Integrated Technical Guidance Notes*, emphasize the importance of youth engagement. The Notes predate the YPS Agenda but stress the need to increase youth participation across SSG/R activities, including in peace processes, needs assessments, and national security policy development.[1]

Why Youth, Peace and Security?

Lacking consensus on a precise age range that demarcates youth, it is fair to say that at least one in five people in the world make up part of the youth population (see Box 1, below).[2] In comparison to other age groups, youth contend with unique challenges when it comes to peace and security, because they are far more vulnerable to and affected by *in*security. Moreover, approximately one quarter of all youth globally reside in settings affected by armed conflict or organized crime.[3] In these contexts, young men often make up the majority of soldiers, combatants, and members of military groups, and constitute 90 percent of the casualties of lethal armed violence.[4] However, young women also confront heightened risks in these

[1] United Nations SSR Task Force, *Security Sector Reform: Integrated Technical Guidance Notes* (2012).
[2] See: DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, "The Youth, Peace and Security Agenda and Security Sector Governance and Reform", SSR Backgrounder Series, 2024.
[3] Graeme Simpson, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security* (UNFPA and PBSO, 2018), p. 12.
[4] Ibid.

environments; facing high rates of physical and sexual abuse and exploitation, while making up 10–30 percent of armed forces and armed groups themselves.[5]

In countries emerging from conflict, youth are particularly vulnerable to being drawn into renewed violence, and are disproportionately both the victims *and* the perpetrators of violence. In part, this is because youth are also disproportionately burdened by social and economic insecurities like high unemployment rates, lack of opportunity, dysfunctional family structures, and social exclusion, which can make them particularly susceptible to violence and crime.[6] Even so, young people possess enormous transformative potential, often standing at the forefront of social protest and reform. Recent examples of youth-led activism around the world – from Serbia,[7] to Bangladesh,[8] to Madagascar, to Nepal,[9] to Chile,[10] to Nigeria[11] – are part of a long arc of history that shows no signs of abating.

Box 1. Defining Youth

The Youth, Peace and Security Agenda limits youth to the ages of 18 to 29 years old. This is not a universal standard, however, even among international and regional organizations. For instance, the African Union uses the term to refer to anyone between the ages of 15 and 35, and the UN Secretariat has used the term to describe people between 15 and 24.

Here, the YPS definition of 18 to 29 will be applied. In other words, *youth are not children* and are not beholden to the rights, obligations, and norms that stem from childhood, but are *young people transitioning into adulthood* – a period of unique pressures, burdens, and constraints.

The security sector itself is often equally central to providing and denying security to youth. This enmeshes the interests of security actors and youth in practical ways. Indeed, countless youth movements, including some of those mentioned above, have been directly instigated or indirectly fuelled by the inappropriate or heavy-handed use of force by security actors in response to youth demonstrators. This complicated relationship between youth and (in)security, particularly the security sector, underpins the YPS Agenda.

This relationship was illustrated in the 2018 study, *The Missing Peace*, which drew attention to "the violence of exclusion" impacting youth, describing it as "a form of structural and psychological violence" that results from the marginalization of young people, politically, socially, culturally, and economically.[12] Through an extensive consultation process with youth around the world, the study found that this exclusion fosters mistrust of the state, as well as at the community level, generating reinforcing cycles of alienation and resentment. In other words, when young people feel unheard and excluded from decision-making, it can lead

[5] Tsjeard Bouta, Georg Frerks, and Ian Bannon, *Gender, Conflict and Development* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2005).
[6] Context-specific analysis remains essential to assessing the situation affecting specific groups of young people and understanding why some engage in violence and others do not, including by capturing a sense of their grievances, the processes by which they join militant organizations, and how they come to see violence as a legitimate option (including the role of "proximate" and "trigger" factors). See: Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development, *Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding: A Practice Note*, 2016.
[7] See: Ivaylo Dinev, "The Student Revolt in Serbia: Vučić's Nemesis?" *ZOiS Spotlight* (blog), Centre for East European and International Studies, 29 January 2025, https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/the-student-revolt-in-serbia-vucics-nemesis
[8] See: Stefan Liller, "Youth leading the way to good governance in Bangladesh", UNDP, 21 October 2024, https://www.undp.org/blog/youth-leading-way-good-governance-bangladesh
[9] See: "The Rise and Spread of Gen Z Protests", *Vision of Humanity*, 1 October 2025, https://www.visionofhumanity.org/the-rise-and-spread-of-gen-z-protests/
[10] See: Loreto Cox, Ricardo González, and Carmen Le Foulon, "The 2019 Chilean Social Upheaval: A Descriptive Approach", *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 16, no. 1 (2023), pp.68–89.
[11] See: Zainab Monisola Olaitan, "*EndSARS* Protest and Political Participation of Youths in Nigeria" in *Development and Regional Stability in Africa: Unlocking Potential*, edited by Adeoye O. Akinola and Emmaculate Asige Liaga (Palgrave Macmillian Cham, 2024).
[12] See: Simpson, *The Missing Peace*, p. xii.

to their frustration and loss of trust in institutions, and, in some cases, drive them toward alternative means, including violence.

These same points were echoed in the UN-World Bank report *Pathways for Peace*. It identified inequality, exclusion, and a sense of injustice as key drivers of violent conflict, especially among youth, and highlighted that the systematic denial of opportunities and lack of inclusion of young people in economic and political participation and security governance fuels grievances, increasing the risk of violence.[13] Like *The Missing Peace*, it emphasized the importance of addressing youth exclusion generally, but especially within the security sector, to prevent conflict and promote lasting peace.

Against this backdrop, the YPS Agenda is an international call to address "the violence of exclusion" that disenfranchises and discourages youth, by meaningfully counteracting the inequality and sense of injustice that complicates the relationship of youth with peace and security. It represents a global attempt to reorient security delivery for and by youth, so that young people have opportunities to participate in politics and economics through engagement and participation, facilitated by formal mechanisms, which invite them to channel their grievances and break cycles of exclusion and inequality. This will require significant reform to how security is delivered.

Such reform will not be achieved quickly or easily, but SSG/R can provide a framework for this process. SSG/R promotes accountability, effectiveness, and inclusivity in security institutions, in complete alignment with the aims of the YPS Agenda. This complementarity means that SSG/R, with its mature body of tools, guidelines, and good practices, can serve as a model for tackling necessary reforms and kickstarting implementation of the YPS Agenda.

YPS policy architecture

In December 2015, the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda was brought to life with the adoption of UN Security Council resolution 2250, establishing a formal framework for United Nations engagement with youth aged 18 to 29 in global peace and security initiatives. Inspired by the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda, resolution 2250 recognized the disproportionate impact of conflict on youth, particularly related to disrupted access to education and economic opportunities, calling for the greater inclusion of young people in conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding.[14] However, the resolution also reflected prevailing concerns about radicalization, frequently framing youth as potential threats; a narrative that was challenged several years later in 2018, with publication of *The Missing Peace* – which argued that negative stereotypes of this sort only serve to marginalize youth and skew institutional responses toward security-focused approaches, rather than prevention and positive engagement.[15]

This analysis prompted a shift in perspective that was encapsulated in subsequent Security Council resolutions. For instance, resolution 2419 (2018) featured fewer references to youth as security threats and emphasized their constructive roles. It also linked the YPS Agenda to the Sustainable Development Goals, and stressed the importance of participation by young women and civil society.[16] The first report of the Secretary-General on YPS, issued in 2020, similarly underscored participation as the central pillar of the Agenda (see Box 2).[17]

Not long after publication of this report by the Secretary-General, the third YPS resolution, 2535 (2020), was adopted.[18] It sought to operationalize previous commitments through the protection of civic space, the explicit inclusion of refugees and war victims, and the requirement that the Secretary-General issue biennial progress reports on YPS.[19] Additionally, resolution 2535 recognized the emergence of National Action Plans

[13] United Nations and World Bank, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018), p. 119.
[14] United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2250 (2015), S/RES/2250 (9 December 2015).
[15] Simpson, *The Missing Peace*, x-xi.
[16] United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2419 (2018), S/RES/2419 (6 June 2018).
[17] Report of the Secretary-General on Youth, Peace and Security, S/2020/167 (2 March 2020).
[18] United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2535 (2020), S/RES/2535 (14 July 2020).
[19] Graeme Simpson and Ali Altiok, "A Brief Analysis of New UN Security Council Resolution 2535 on Youth, Peace and Security", Interpeace, August 2021.

(NAPs) for YPS, based on the WPS framework, as a key to national implementation.[20] A fourth YPS resolution, 2807 (2025), was adopted on the Agenda's 10th anniversary. This resolution was considerably shorter than the previous three resolution, consisting of only 8 articles. It largely did not confer any new obligations, but rather focused on reiterating existing mandates, though it did for the first time formally recognize the new UN Youth Office's role in contributing to the Agenda.[21]

Subsequent reports of the Secretary-General on YPS were issued in 2022 and 2024. These highlighted some progress but also challenges, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on implementation and a recent decline in references to youth in UN documentation. Nevertheless, both reports reiterated the need to deepen the integration of youth across all levels of peace and security work, calling for expanded local, national, and regional commitments to ensuring the continued advancement of the YPS Agenda.

Box 2. The five pillars of YPS

The text of resolution 2250 (2015) is divided into six sections, based on five themes, which have come to be known as the "Five Pillars" of the Agenda: 1) Participation, 2) Protection, 3) Prevention, 4) Partnerships and 5) Disengagement & Reintegration. These pillars provide a framework for implementation of the YPS Agenda.

- **Participation** – Member States must increase inclusive representation and participation of youth in decision-making at all levels to prevent and resolve conflict.
- **Protection** – Existing international humanitarian and human rights law must be respected, all parties to armed conflict must take necessary measures to protect civilians (including youth) from all forms of violence, and all states must respect and ensure the human rights of all persons (including youth).
- **Prevention** – An inclusive and enabling environment must be created to facilitate the contribution of youth to peacebuilding efforts and guarantee their benefit from economic and social development.
- **Partnerships** – Member States must support efforts to improve coordination among UN bodies, as well as the efforts of local communities and civil society to counter violent extremism.
- **Disengagement & Reintegration** – Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) activities must take into account the needs of youth and provide economic and educational opportunities.

For more information on how SSG/R can assist in operationalizing these pillars, see the section title "Leveraging SSG/R to improve implementation of YPS".

Advancing the principles of YPS through SSG/R

The nature of the YPS Agenda and its core tenet that youth inclusion must be prioritized across security provision and decision-making fundamentally requires reforms to security sectors. While none of the YPS resolutions reference security sector reform (SSR) explicitly, they clearly describe SSG/R activities. And commitments on youth participation, protection, prevention of violence, and access to justice all translate into obligations for security providers; whether safeguarding civic space, investigating abuses, strengthening accountability, or enabling youth contributions to peacebuilding.

Making these commitments a reality can only be achieved through reforms to security policies, practices, and institutions. For example, resolution 2535 (2020) calls to increase the inclusive representation of youth in the prevention and resolution of conflict, as well as in peacebuilding.[22] This is a call for reform toward the delivery of more holistic human and state security – a key aim of SSG/R. Resolution 2535 also reaffirms the duty of states to protect youth, in particular by respecting and promoting their human rights and fundamental freedoms and ensuring their equal access to justice, which implicates security stakeholders. Moreover, it

[20] Ibid.; S/RES/2535 (2020), Article 14.
[21] United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2807 (2025), S/RES/2807 (12 December 2025).
[22] S/RES/2535 (2020), Article 1.

reiterates that security providers have a role to play in ensuring a safe environment for youth working on peace and security, including by protecting civic and political spaces.[23] The resolution makes similar commitments on prevention, urging Member States to facilitate inclusive, safe, enabling, and gender responsive environments for youth, and to implement violence prevention activities that support social cohesion.[24] It once again emphasizes the role of security services in implementing the Agenda by mandating that states investigate threats, harassment, and violence against youth, and develop new or existing mechanisms to better prevent violence and strengthen accountability.

Resolution 2535 was the first of the four YPS resolutions to encourage states to formulate and implement actions plans at various levels, including national action plans (NAPs), on YPS.[25] These provide the basis for monitoring progress of YPS implementation and building accountability for the Agenda at the local and national levels, helping crystallize YPS commitments in policies and programming. To that end, it is obvious that security providers and SSG/R processes have an important role to play, from protecting youth to upholding accountability and rule of law.

This synergy between YPS and SSG/R is reflected in UN policy. Recent reports of the Secretary-General on YPS have highlighted youth involvement in various security reform activities, such as training and efforts to strengthen governance and oversight of security forces.[26] That said, there is still room for much greater inclusion of youth – especially young women – in peacebuilding and in the broader peace and security agenda, as Simpson noted in *The Missing Peace*.[27]

In resolution 2553 (2020), the thematic resolution on SSR, the UN Security Council reaffirmed the relationship between the YPS Agenda and SSG/R, as well as the importance of engaging youth to ensure sustainable peace and prevent conflict.[28] These points were reinforced in the 2022 report of the Secretary-General on SSR, which stressed that inclusive national ownership of SSR should be a principle of all UN support to reform, and recommended that the capacity of youth to participate in security governance be fostered.[29] The UN's *Security Sector Reform: Integrated Technical Guidance Notes* also underscore the importance of youth engagement across SSG/R programming, advocating for a whole-of-government approach that links the security sector to, among others, the youth sector.[30]

Despite these frameworks and synergies, concrete commitments to implementing the YPS Agenda are rare at the national level, and current practice tends to be ad hoc or fails to be labelled or appreciated as relevant to YPS implementation. In an analysis of eleven YPS NAPs, SSR activities were often described but security reform was rarely referenced overtly, even in countries where SSR programming has represented a national priority.[31] This indicates that there is considerable room for improvement when it comes to integrating SSG/R into YPS programming at the national level. Such integration is essential, however, as a prerequisite to effective implementation of the YPS Agenda.

Takeaways

- ➔ **Implement international YPS commitments**: National actors should implement commitments from Security Council resolutions on YPS that confer obligations on to security actors to improve youth participation, protection, and prevention of violence.

[23] Ibid., Article 2.
[24] Ibid., Article 5.
[25] Ibid., Article 14.
[26] Report of the Secretary-General on Youth, Peace and Security, S/2024/207 (1 March 2024); and Report of the Secretary-General on Youth, Peace and Security, S/2022/220 (16 March 2022).
[27] Simpson, *The Missing Peace*.
[28] United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2553 (2020), S/RES/2553 (3 December 2020).
[29] Report of the Secretary-General on Strengthening security sector reform, S/2022/280 (15 March 2022).
[30] United Nations SSR Task Force, *Security Sector Reform: Integrated Technical Guidance Notes*.
[31] Taynja Abdel Bagy, *Youth, Peace and Security National Action Plans and Security Sector Governance and Reform: Guidance Note on Developing Youth, Peace and Security National Action Plans from an SSG/R perspective* (DCAF, 2026).

- **Develop multi-level strategies**: National actors should create and develop comprehensive policies and action plans at local, regional, and national levels that actively facilitate youth contributions to peacebuilding and SSR.
- **Explicitly integrate YPS into global SSG/R frameworks**: International actors should make the role of SSG/R in advancing the YPS agenda more explicit in future policy frameworks, and continue to emphasize the centrality of youth and of the YPS agenda within SSG/R policies.

Leveraging SSG/R to improve implementation of YPS

SSG/R can be operationalized in various ways to realize the Five Pillars of the YPS Agenda: Participation, Protection, Prevention, Partnerships, and Disengagement & Reintegration. In fact, SSG/R should be viewed as a means of kickstarting momentum on YPS, progress on which remains modest a decade after its introduction. While the UN has advanced the Agenda through multiple resolutions, reports of the Secretary-General, and institutional backing, YPS has not achieved substantial national and local support. As a result, the development of national roadmaps or NAPs for YPS has been slow to pick up steam; only five dedicated YPS NAPs were adopted through 2021-2023, though the adoption of at least ten more followed in 2024, 2025 and 2026.

It is worth noting that some states have also opted to use existing mechanisms to implement YPS, such as the more mature and elaborate WPS Agenda, or laws and policies already in effect, but the absence of concrete commitments to the YPS Agenda specifically has created accountability gaps. And so, given the significant complementarities between SSG/R and the YPS Agenda, practitioners working on YPS in either of these contexts can and should look to SSG/R for guidance and good practices. This will not only help drive the YPS Agenda forward but will better link it to ongoing efforts aimed at increasing youth involvement in the security sector.

Participation

Achieving youth participation is fundamental to delivering on the other pillars of the YPS Agenda, so it is participation that naturally receives the most emphasis.[32] This means taking youth "views into account in decision-making processes, from negotiation and prevention of violence to peace agreements", by facilitating youth contributions across the entire spectrum of peace and security practice.[33] Such an inclusive vision of participation is important because, too often, youth – especially young women – are led to believe that their participation in peace and security is unwelcome.[34] This adds to the distrust with which youth view the security sector, and represents a particular challenge to SSG/R.

The UN has long recognized the right of youth to participate in SSR, to be employed in the security sector, and to contribute to the security of their communities, and has advocated for support of these rights through processes that encourage youth leadership and decision-making and "promote participation and representation and give youth a voice on their rights, aspirations and perspectives, which are critical for sustainable outcomes."[35] Yet, in practice, there is much room for the better promotion of tools that ensure the inclusion of the most marginalized voices and allow for the identification of their true security needs and priorities. This should include needs assessments that centre youth voices, regular consultations with diverse groups of young people, and efforts to increase youth access to participatory processes associated with SSG/R.

[32] For example, in the 2020 Report of the Secretary-General on YPS (S/2020/167), there were 20 sections dedicated to participation, amounting to more than the 18 dedicated to the other four pillars combined.
[33] Simpson, *The Missing Peace*.
[34] Report of the Secretary-General on YPS, S/2020/167, para. 15.
[35] United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration, *Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards*, Module 5.30: "Youth and DDR" (2021).

One useful approach may be the development of youth-oriented online tools, given the affinity of many young people for digital engagement.[36] This offers the prospect of not only increasing participation, but *diverse* participation, as acknowledged in UN Security Council resolution 2535 (2020).[37] However, this kind of digital inclusion of young people should not be limited to instruments such as one-way online surveys, for instance, as they do not facilitate *meaningful* participation. Digitally enabled youth must be understood as potentially powerful agents for peace who can play a key role in preventing and resolving conflict if digital spaces are leveraged to effectively increase their participation and representation in decision-making at all levels.[38]

Ultimately, this means that efforts to achieve the YPS Agenda and SSG/R alike must go beyond a tokenistic inclusion of youth. Indeed, the implementing bodies for both processes should increasingly seek youth-led projects and initiatives, and should be youth-led themselves. This should be complemented by youth-led research and advocacy on SSG/R, to influence public policies and dialogues on security as well as SSG/R practices, and bring new and innovative approaches and practices to the table.

Protection

Young people have a right to feel secure, and supported in taking advantage of every opportunity to lead an ever better life.[39] The ambition of this pillar is thus to "ensure the protection of young civilians' lives and human rights and investigate and prosecute those responsible for crimes perpetrated against them."[40] SSR has a clear role to play here in reinforcing the capacity of security institutions to prioritize protection, especially of young people – who are exceptionally vulnerable in any context – and various YPS policy documents call attention to the multitude of unique protection threats and challenges that youth must confront.[41] Young activists are often exposed to retaliation, including detention and violence, for speaking out; young men are at high risk of being marginalized and disproportionately targeted by security actors; and young women face a heightened threat of gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and rape.[42]

These examples illustrate gendered differences, but distinct protection needs also arise on the basis of socioeconomic, ethnic, religious, or political differences. Therefore, taking an intersectional approach to these protection needs could yield more effective delivery of security. This makes analysis done to date on the role of gender in the implementation of SSR, particularly as it relates to intersectionality, directly relevant to youth and to incorporating an intersectional approach into security provision that accounts for the different protection needs of young people.[43]

In other words, youth have different protection needs depending on their class, race, disability, poverty level, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, and other criteria. Delivering security and protection to them in a responsive and tailored manner requires an understanding within the security sector about the expectations of young people vis-à-vis protection. Capturing the data needed to obtain this insight can be accomplished through an intersectional analysis – a tool designed to support SSR that can be used similarly to support implementation of the YPS Agenda.

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[36] See: SecDev Group, *Digitally-enabled Peace and Security: Reflections for the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda* (2017).
[37] S/RES/2535 (2020), Article 9.
[38] SecDev Group, *Digitally-enabled Peace and Security*.
[39] United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration, *Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards*, Module 5.30.
[40] Simpson, *The Missing Peace*.
[41] For example, each of the three reports of the Secretary-General on YPS enumerate a number of protection challenges facing youth.
[42] See: Nick Lowles, ed., *State of HATE 2021: Backlash, Conspiracies & Confrontation* (London: HOPE not hate); and Erica Harper, *Reconceptualizing the drivers of violent extremism: an agenda for child & youth resilience* (Terre des hommes – helping children worldwide & WANA Institute, 2018).
[43] See: Henri Myrttinen, "Security Sector Governance, Security Sector Reform and Gender", Tool 1 in *Gender and Security Toolkit*, edited by Megan Bastick (DCAF, OSCE/ODIHR, and UN Women, 2020); and Lorraine Andaya Serrano, "Integrating Gender in Project Design and Monitoring for the Security and Justice Sector", Tool 15 in *Gender and Security Toolkit*, edited by Megan Bastick (DCAF, OSCE/ODIHR, and UN Women, 2020).

Prevention

Prevention, as envisioned by the YPS Agenda, focuses "support to young people in preventing violence and in promoting a culture of tolerance and intercultural dialogue".[44] As the 2022 Report of the Secretary-General on YPS put it, "preventive efforts can only be effective if use is made of the capacities, perspectives, contextual knowledge and creativity of diverse groups of young people".[45] Expressed as policy, this means prioritizing a preventive approach through long-term efforts directed toward addressing underlying drivers of conflict and transforming systems of exclusion into systems of inclusion.[46] To that end, the most effective prevention strategies are grounded in sound knowledge of and support for the positive attributes, resources, and capacities (i.e. "positive resilience") demonstrated by young people in responding to marginalization.[47]

SSG/R contributes to prevention by seeking to address the "violence of exclusion" that constitutes a root cause and driving factor for engagement in violence, especially by young men.[48] As has been on display in the youth-led protest movements noted above – in Serbia, Bangladesh, Chile, Nigeria, and elsewhere – young people are more vulnerable to abuses and misconduct on the part of security forces, and in many countries, an unrepresentative or abusive security sector that fails to protect citizens against security threats and human rights abuses is itself a risk factor, particularly for youth. This provides numerous entry points, where the YPS Agenda and SSG/R intersect.

Promoting the participation of young people in SSG/R processes is a prerequisite to more people-centred approaches to security, and it is by addressing the specific needs of youth that incentives can be created for young people to resolve conflict through peaceful means.[49] Youth involvement in SSG/R also contributes to preventing conflicts that would otherwise arise from abuses and misconduct by security actors. Additionally, within the security sector, reforms to improve the accountability and transparency of management practices such as recruitment and career development impact young recruits and contribute to preventing the causes of potential grievances. For example, professional pathways that reinforce ethical conduct and merit-based advancement help reduce corruption and prevent destabilizing eventualities like coups.[50] Hence, embedding youth perspectives in prevention policies and strategies strengthens the accountability of those mechanisms.

Partnerships

Resolution 2250 (2015), the first Security Council resolution on YPS, signalled the importance of partnerships between youth-led organizations and Member States, United Nations entities, regional organizations, and civil society. This extended from the recognition that youth are key actors in implementing the YPS Agenda, but must necessarily forge partnerships with other groups, stakeholders, organizations, and entities to achieve this outcome. In fact, the resolution itself and the YPS Agenda would not exist but for the drive of youth-led organizations to forge diverse partnerships across civil society, and with Members States and United Nations entities.

Notably, lessons from SSG/R implementation – such as the benefits of working through multistakeholder platforms, engaging with powerful and diverse segments of society, and fostering trust between communities and security providers – can be leveraged to design more informed and effective YPS programming under the partnership pillar.[51] Many SSG/R efforts already contribute to YPS objectives, from youth participation in local or public security councils, to the inclusion of young people in police reform processes, to trust-building activities involving youth and law enforcement.[52] In this way, regional SSG/R frameworks offer ready-made pathways for advancing meaningful youth engagement in security.

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[44] Simpson, *The Missing Peace*.
[45] S/2022/220, Summary.
[46] Report of the Secretary-General on YPS, S/2020/167.
[47] United Nations, Draft Report of the Expert Group Meeting on "Youth, Peace and Security: Social Issues and Social Policies", Rome, 30-31 October 2017.
[48] Simpson, *The Missing Peace*.
[49] United Nations and World Bank, *Pathways for Peace*, p. xxi.
[50] In a 2023 report, the UNDP named corruption as one of the main drivers of both public discontent and of a propensity among security forces to act with impunity. See: United Nations Development Programme, *Soldiers and Citizens: Military Coups and the Need for Democratic Renewal in Africa* (UNDP, 2023), pp. 16 and 28.
[51] Inputs from a discussion with OSCE participants following a DCAF presentation on "Synergies between the Youth, Peace and Security and SSG/R", Vienna, 17 June 2022.
[52] Ibid.

Global policy frameworks and platforms

The UN has committed to forging new partnerships with youth across its work on peace and security, including through the 2023 creation of a dedicated Youth Office, as well as broader efforts to better integrate youth into key policy documents. These initiatives are laying the foundations for increased youth participation in global peace and security going forward, which will have positive downstream impacts on the ability of youth to engage in SSG/R. At the same time, the UN has made commitments to developing more sustainable financing mechanisms for YPS, such as by making better use of the Peacebuilding Fund and incorporating youth perspectives in peacebuilding initiatives.[53]

The UN has also supported efforts to facilitate the participation of young people at the national and regional levels, such as through youth forums and dialogues. On top of this, there is value simply in giving increased visibility and importance to the needs of youth at the international level. For, this confers legitimacy on youth as key stakeholders, and in turn, creates entry points for youth engagement with national SSG/R processes.

Regional partnerships

Many regional organizations have developed expertise in both YPS and SSG/R, and understand the practical entry points that link the two agendas. While approaches vary, regional frameworks demonstrate that efforts at the regional level – both in policy and practice – are keenly focused on youth engagement in security and peacebuilding processes. The African Union and OSCE are both illustrative of this, each having adopted policies that not only highlight youth as relevant stakeholders in peace and security but embed the core SSG/R principles of participation, inclusivity, and responsiveness in relation to the security needs of the entire population, including youth. Moreover, these frameworks explicitly or implicitly call for engagement with youth organizations in SSG/R.

African Union Policy Frameworks on YPS and SSG/R

- African Union Commission, *Continental Framework for Youth, Peace and Security* (2020).
- African Union Assembly, *African Union Policy Framework on Security Sector Reform (SSR)* (2013).

OSCE Policy Frameworks on YPS and SSG/R

- Report by the Secretary General of the OSCE, *The OSCE Approach to Security Sector Governance and Reform (SSG/R)*, SEC.GAL/42/19 (Vienna: OSCE, 2019).
- OSCE Secretariat, “Cross-Dimensional Approaches to SSG/R” in *Security Sector Governance and Reform: Guidelines for OSCE Staff* (Vienna: OSCE, 2022).

National and local partnerships

Experience at the national level has demonstrated that, in some states, youth coalitions and platforms have formed over time, as in Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Central African Republic, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen.[54] Drawing on the expertise of such organizations through partnerships can enrich policy making, as well as strategy implementation, by incorporating the perspectives of youth – who are knowledgeable about the context-specific issues encountered by young people. Some countries, including the DRC, Finland, Malawi, Nigeria, The Gambia, and Philippines, have mobilized domestic youth networks to produce national action plans on YPS.

At the local level, security sectors must build partnerships with communities as well. These should be inclusive of youth groups and should extend to the most remote, far-to-reach localities. This is vital for the success of initiatives like community policing, which rely on the buy-in of all of society, including youth. Efforts to partner with informal security actors – who are often young people – are also key.[55]

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[53] See: Report of the Secretary-General on Youth, Peace and Security, S/2024/207. NB: In December 2024, the second CSO-UN Dialogue on Peacebuilding, held at UN headquarters, made YPS a special focus and provided a rare platform for youth from the Global South to actively participate in and influence global discussions on peace and security.
[54] See: Report of the Secretary-General on YPS, S/2020/167.
[55] Informal security actors include legal and statutory actors (e.g. civil society and non-governmental organizations, or media) as well as extra-legal and armed non-state actors (e.g. customary and traditional authorities, rebel groups, militias, vigilantes, or criminal groups). See: Sue Enfield, “Lessons of working with informal security actors”, K4D

Disengagement & reintegration

The fifth pillar of the YPS Agenda focuses on disengagement and reintegration to promote investment in youth affected by armed conflict, through education and employment.[56] The term "disengagement" is not clearly defined in YPS framework documents, but is commonly understood to encompass the two "Ds" of DDR (i.e. the first two elements of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration). Like SSR, DDR is critical to supporting post-conflict societies in achieving stability and consolidating peace.[57]

DDR programming is often conducted in contexts where youth constitute the bulk of former combatants.[58] Where this is the case, reintegration – both into society and into formal security institutions – is vitally important to ensuring youth inclusion. Indeed, young people have often been excluded from post-conflict decision-making structures, and youth-specific issues have often been ignored by post-conflict governments. This has made many past DDR efforts largely ineffective, plagued by failures of perspective; such as a disregard for the responsibilities of many young people as providers and caregivers and a tendency to consider youth just older than 18 as adults and therefore neglect some of their needs.[59]

Takeaways

- **Involve youth throughout SSR processes**: National and international actors should include youth in all stages of security sector reform, from assessing needs to designing solutions and delivering security, by removing formal barriers (like age restrictions) and informal barriers (like inaccessible platforms).
- **Strengthen local dialogue and youth SSG/R expertise:** National and local actors should actively support the engagement of youth coalitions and platforms in SSG/R processes, inviting their expertise and perspectives to shape context-specific reforms. To build trust, improve accountability, and strengthen inclusive security delivery, actors must create regular, accessible opportunities for dialogue between youth organizations and security providers, such as through community policing forums or local security councils.
- **Prioritize prevention and intersectional analysis**: National and local actors should undertake intersectional analyses of youth protection needs to deliver inclusive security and prioritize long-term prevention policies that address root causes, ensuring these strategies reflect the diverse experiences of young people.
- **Create positive incentives and roles within the security sector**: National actors must provide positive incentives for youth careers, such as better training, education, pay, and professional development, while ensuring equal opportunities for youth and former combatants to join the sector or participate in DDR processes to prevent relapse into conflict.
- **Foster engagement through digital tools and dialogue**: Security actors should utilize new means to foster participation, specifically by introducing digital tools and creating regular, accessible opportunities for dialogue (such as community policing forums) to build trust, improve accountability, and channel concerns into peaceful participation in security governance.

Helpdesk Report, 11 June 2019; and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Youth and Armed Conflict", Factsheet, n.d.

[56] Simpson, *The Missing Peace*.

[57] Alan Bryden and Vincenza Scherrer, eds., *Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration and Security Sector Reform: Insights from UN Experience in Afghanistan, Burundi, the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo* (Lit Verlag, 2012).

[58] United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration, *Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards*, Module 5.30.

[59] Ibid.

How the YPS Agenda can improve SSG/R

The YPS Agenda can be as useful a tool in the implementation of SSG/R as is true in reverse. The aim of SSG/R is to promote the principles of good governance, particularly inclusiveness, but imperfect reform can result when this goal is met by resistance and competing interests. A noted weakness in this regard has been the equality and inclusion of youth.

For instance, Schnabel and Tabyshalieva observed over a decade ago that, "More often than not, peacebuilding activities are designed and implemented without consideration for – let alone the participation and resulting empowerment of – children and youth".[60] Simpson made the same point in *The Missing Peace*, contending that SSR has not "given enough attention to the inclusion and participation of young people as a central component".[61] It is this weakness related to youth inclusion in SSG/R programming, but also in justice reform, prison reform, community policing, and peacebuilding more generally, that served as the impetus for development of the YPS Agenda. Simply put, SSG/R processes, which have not uniformly or comprehensively integrated youth perspectives, can be more effective and more accountable if they intentionally prioritize youth and elevate commitments made in support of the YPS Agenda.

The UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) has published "Principles of effective governance for sustainable development" that are highly relevant to YPS, and can also aid in addressing some weaknesses of past SSG/R programming.[62] These principles focus on the key good governance concepts of inclusiveness, effectiveness, and accountability. Importantly, they characterize inclusiveness as a measure of more than mere participation, emphasizing the importance of non-discrimination, subsidiarity, and intergenerational equity. The principles define effectiveness in terms of competence, sound policymaking, and collaboration that ensures institutions are capable, coordinated, and resilient; and accountability as extending from integrity, transparency, and independent oversight that compels institutions to act lawfully, combat corruption, and remain answerable to the public. Through this ECOSOC lens, it is clear how a YPS perspective can lead to more inclusive, more effective, and more accountable SSG/R programming.

Inclusiveness

Inclusion and participation are central objectives of the YPS Agenda, and inclusion is also one of the principles of good governance that underlies SSG/R. By emphasizing youth inclusion in peace and security, YPS thus provides an impetus for SSG/R processes that more meaningfully include youth. Moreover, the YPS framework supports an intersectional approach to inclusion, with the third Security Council resolution on YPS, 2535 (2020), highlighting not only the need for full participation but also for non-discrimination on the basis of "race, colour, sex, language, disability, religion or belief, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status".[63] It is vital that youth are not seen as a monolith, in other words, but as stakeholders with varying security needs that depend on a range of factors. Youth-focused needs assessments can drill down into the needs of young people, and help shed light on adaptations that can be made to existing proscriptive solutions, to better address specific marginalized groups.

Drawing inspiration from the WPS Agenda, the YPS Agenda can also be leveraged as a tool to promote SSG/R at a global level. The WPS policy architecture explicitly recognizes the role of SSR in implementing the aims of the WPS Agenda, spurring global efforts on women and SSR. Likewise, YPS implementation strategies that incorporate successful WPS practices can enhance youth inclusion in SSG/R processes. This should be informed by the ECOSOC governance principles, in which inclusiveness is described as a function of:

- **Leaving no one behind**

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[60] Albrecht Schnabel and Anara Tabyshalieva, eds., *Escaping Victimhood: Children, Youth and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding* (United Nations University Press, 2013), p. 4.
[61] Simpson, *The Missing Peace*, p. 16.
[62] United Nations Economic and Social Council, Principles of effective governance for sustainable development, Supplement No. 24, E/2018/44-E/C.16/2018/8, para. 31 (2018).
[63] S/RES/2535 (2020).

Public policies should be designed and delivered to take into the account the needs of all people, *especially* the poorest and most marginalized. As youth are an extremely marginalized group and are highly susceptible to being victims of violence, and the YPS Agenda attempts to ensure that youth are not left behind in peace and security matters, it is here that YPS can contribute to delivering better SSG/R. Too often, SSG/R is not inclusive and is elite driven, but by elevating the importance of youth inclusion in peace and security, the YPS Agenda should serve as a reminder to policymakers involved in SSG/R that reform will only be successful if it is truly inclusive, particularly of youth perspectives and needs.

- **Non-discrimination**
  Public services must be provided without distinction as to race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, disability, or other status. This demands services that are accessible to all, gender responsive, and culturally competent, which can only be delivered by a public sector workforce that is itself diverse and representative of the entire population. In the security sector, it is such a workforce that is the ultimate objective of many SSG/R activities. The YPS Agenda also acknowledges the importance of this diversity in peace and security, but focuses the lens on youth.

- **Participation**
  All groups should be involved in deciding matters that directly affect them, and should have the chance to influence relevant policy, such as through multi-stakeholder forums and public consultations. In the YPS Agenda, participation is the foundational pillar, a prerequisite to meeting the mandate of the other four pillars. By participating in peace and security processes, youth not only develop mutual trust with security actors but also contribute meaningfully to building sustainable mechanisms and networks with lasting power over time, which also happens to be key to successful SSG/R.

- **Intergenerational equity**
  Promoting inclusion and good governance requires taking a longer-term perspective, while balancing short term needs. Youth are indeed the future but they are living in the present, which is why the YPS Agenda emphasizes both short- and long-term planning. It also encourages the greater integration of prevention into SSG/R programming, since addressing the root causes of insecurity among youth breaks the cycles of exclusion that necessitated the creation of the Agenda in the first place.

- **Subsidiarity**
  Government services should be delivered at the level that is most effective, whether national, sub-national, or local. Criticism of SSG/R programming has called out approaches that are too state-centric, suggesting more localized or hybrid security arrangements would deliver more effective security.[64] The YPS Agenda can be leveraged to foster increased dialogue on security needs at the local level.

Effectiveness

SSG/R is only effective when it is inclusive and security is delivered to an entire population equitably, regardless of their status. When large segments of a population are insecure, and cannot count on or do not trust the security sector for protection, the sector is clearly failing to deliver on its mandate. It is often youth who are excluded, leaving many young people who lack access to security through official channels to seek it out through unofficial channels. But, by including and engaging youth, and providing formal mechanisms for this engagement, feedback loops can be created that give rise to adaptations responsive to the needs of young people. This allows a security sector to address security deficits, thereby enhancing its overall

[64] See: Ursula C. Schroeder and Fairlie Chappuis, “New Perspectives on Security Sector Reform: The Role of Local Agency and Domestic Politics”, *International Peacekeeping* 21, no. 2 (2014), pp. 133–148.

effectiveness, and could also improve the relationship between youth and the security sector, ultimately deepening trust.

Again, the ECOSOC governance principles provide a more granular assessment of effectiveness, through the lens of competence, sound policymaking, and collaboration. All of these are aims of the YPS Agenda as well, and would enhance SSG/R programming.

- **Competence**
  Security institutions must have sufficient expertise, resources, and tools to meet the mandates under their authority. To enable the YPS Agenda, this means security providers must be equipped with the skills and knowledge to protect youth, respect their rights, and engage constructively with young people, including through specialized training on youth inclusion and gender sensitivity.
- **Sound policymaking**
  Broad commitments must be translated into practice in a coherent and sensible way. In other words, implementing the YPS Agenda calls for the integration of youth perspectives into national security policies, SSR strategies, and peacebuilding plans, to ensure they reflect the lived realities of diverse youth populations, especially those most at risk of exclusion or violence. This effort could be supported by youth audits of security sector legislation, to identify and correct laws and policies that contribute to inequality and exclusion affecting young people.
- **Collaboration**
  Whole-of-government and multi-stakeholder partnerships are crucial; and in the security sector, should involve structured cooperation between security actors, youth organizations, civil society, and local authorities, to facilitate co-created problem solving directed at conflict prevention, accountability, and peacebuilding. These are all specific objectives of the YPS Agenda, and could be accomplished through a NAP that centres this kind of collaboration and a whole-of-government approach.

Accountability

The YPS Agenda commits the UN, regional organizations, Member States, and other local stakeholders to engage on matters pertaining to youth, peace, and security, including SSG/R, which increases accountability. Whether at the regional, national, or local level, efforts toward accountability can be achieved through public commitments that also aid in implementing SSG/R, rooted in plans or strategies developed in partnership with new and diverse groups of actors – including youth councils, coalitions, platforms, and networks that have not traditionally been engaged in SSG/R or peacebuilding. These new stakeholders can help oversee and hold governments accountable to YPS commitments, while also improving the quality and inclusiveness of security sector oversight.

The goal of SSG/R is a holistic form of security. By mobilizing youth engagement on peace and security, the YPS Agenda can work in concert with SSG/R to expand and innovate new mechanisms for oversight and accountability that are increasingly cross-sectoral, adaptable, and responsive. Turning once more to the ECOSOC governance principles, it is useful to think of accountability as comprising three key elements: integrity, transparency, and independent oversight.

- **Integrity**
  Security institutions must operate lawfully and ethically, resisting corruption and abuse of power. To fulfil the YPS Agenda, this means the security sector must uphold youth rights, protect civic spaces, and avoid discriminatory practices that erode trust between youth and the state.
- **Transparency**
  Decision-making should be open to public scrutiny and access to information should be promoted. In the context of YPS implementation, this involves clearly and proactively communicating security policies, budgets, and reform plans in a way that ensures young people understand and can influence matters that affect their safety and participation. There is also an important accountability component in the publishing of NAPs, in which states make transparent commitments to implementing the YPS Agenda.
- **Independent oversight**

One means of ensuring accountability is through external monitoring by state institutions, such as parliaments or ombuds institutions, and by civil society. The YPS Agenda presents opportunities for youth organizations to engage in this kind of monitoring, to hold security actors accountable for violations, demand justice, and participate in shaping fair and rights-based security governance.

Takeaways

- **Inclusiveness**: National actors should institutionalize youth-focused, intersectional needs assessments and audit security policies to remove exclusionary barriers, while facilitating exchanges between the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agendas to integrate lessons learned and strengthen YPS implementation.
- **Effectiveness**: To ensure security is delivered equitably, national actors should create dedicated channels for youth feedback on the security sector and equip security providers with specialized training on youth inclusion and gender sensitivity, allowing reforms to actively respond to the specific needs of young people.
- **Accountability**: National actors can strengthen YPS implementation by producing National Action Plans (NAPs) with specific, measurable commitments linked to broader security reforms and by sensitizing independent oversight bodies, such as ombuds institutions, to hold state institutions accountable for YPS commitments.

Conclusion

As the YPS Agenda marks its tenth anniversary, it has clearly played a role in shaping global norms and generating momentum around youth inclusion in security. Even so, implementation has been inconsistent, fragmented, and insufficient at all levels. Given that SSG/R provides both the framework and tools to address some of the deficiencies in YPS implementation, these should be harnessed to transform YPS commitments into practice.

The complementarities between the YPS Agenda and SSG/R are not only conceptual but deeply practical. Absent accountable, inclusive, and effective security institutions, the protection, participation, and empowerment of youth cannot be realized; and without the active and meaningful engagement of youth, SSG/R efforts will fall short of delivering people-centred security. Policymakers and practitioners should therefore act decisively to bridge any YPS implementation gaps.

First, states must embed YPS commitments directly into national SSR policy frameworks, explicitly referencing youth participation, protection, and prevention. YPS NAPs should also integrate SSG/R priorities, creating coherent frameworks for reform that recognize youth as central stakeholders.

Second, mechanisms for youth participation must be institutionalized rather than operated ad hoc. To that end, governments and security institutions should establish permanent youth advisory councils, integrate youth into oversight structures, and support the contribution of youth-led organizations to monitoring, advocacy, and accountability. These mechanisms must ensure diverse and inclusive participation, for example by engaging young women and other marginalized youth.

Third, security providers must enhance youth protection, including by creating clear protocols to prevent, investigate, and sanction abuses against young people, particularly youth activists. Intersectional approaches are essential, recognizing that young women, displaced youth, and minority youth often face distinct vulnerabilities. Independent oversight institutions – parliaments, ombuds offices, and human rights commissions – must be mandated and equipped to work with youth organizations in upholding these protections.

Fourth, prevention must move from rhetoric to on-the-ground investments in addressing structural drivers of exclusion and violence. These include unemployment, corruption, discriminatory security practices, and lack of access to justice. By prioritizing education, vocational training, and pathways for youth into professional

security roles, states can transform the security sector from a source of mistrust into a driver of opportunity and stability.

Fifth, partnerships must be leveraged across all levels – with international organizations continuing to mainstream YPS within SSG/R policies, financing mechanisms, and peace operations; regional organizations offering practical entry points to link these frameworks; and national governments cultivating partnerships with youth networks and local security actors to ensure reforms are grounded in lived realities.

Over the coming decade, it will be critical to embed YPS principles into broader SSG/R efforts, and vice versa. By operationalizing inclusiveness, effectiveness, and accountability through concrete SSG/R programming, national and international actors can move beyond declarative commitments and finally deliver security that is truly people-centred. It is only by delivering security with and for youth that sustainable peace can be achieved.