



CONTRIBUTING TO THE REALIZATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS THROUGH THE YOUTH, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA

Thematic Paper developed by
the **United Nations Alliance of Civilizations**
and the **United Nations Youth Office**



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The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and the United Nations Youth Office developed this thematic paper to analyze the links and synergies between the Youth, Peace and Security agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals and reflect on the impact of the entities' efforts to advance both frameworks.

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The **United Nations Alliance of Civilizations**¹, one of the leading United Nations platforms for intercultural and interreligious dialogue, understanding and cooperation, builds bridges between societies, promotes dialogue and understanding, and seeks to forge the collective political will required to accomplish these tasks. Youth is one of the pillars of UNAOC together with education, migration, media, and the role of women as mediators and peacemakers in conflicts with cultural and religious settings. Through education, capacity-building, training, and many other opportunities, UNAOC empowers young people and youth-led civil society globally and recognizes them as powerful agents for social change, highlighting the will of the majority to reject violent extremism and embrace diversity.

The **United Nations Youth Office**², formally established in 2022, builds upon the immense work of the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, which placed a central focus on youth, peace and security initiatives. As the first dedicated entity for youth affairs within the United Nations Secretariat, the UN Youth Office champions the rights, perspectives, contributions, and potential of young people everywhere. We lead efforts to enhance collaboration, coordination, and accountability on youth affairs, ensuring that the United Nations works effectively and inclusively with young people in all their diversity. By fostering meaningful, inclusive, and impactful participation of youth in decision-making processes, our work focuses on empowering young people as agents of transformative change in addressing global challenges in the areas of sustainable development, peace and security, human rights, and humanitarian action.

¹ On 6 July 2015, Member States demonstrated their support for the work and achievements of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and adopted by consensus General Assembly Resolution [A/RES/69/312](#), affirming UNAOC as an entity within the United Nations system.

² The United Nations Youth Office was established in September 2022 by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution [A/RES/76/306](#) as a dedicated office for youth affairs in the Secretariat, integrating the former Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth (OSGEY).



Deputy Secretary-General Ms. Amina Mohammed and Assistant Secretary-General for Youth Affairs Mr. Felipe Paullier speak with young people at the Closing Session of the Summit of the Future Action Day One, '#YouthLead for the Future.'
Photo: UN Youth Office

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Setting the Stage: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

In 2015, the world embarked on a collective journey to strengthen universal peace and eradicate poverty. The 2030 Agenda, unanimously adopted by the 193 Member States, lays out 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets, setting a bold path to achieve sustainable development, peace, and prosperity for all people and the planet. Youth have been integral to the 2030 Agenda, as they formed alliances and partnerships worldwide to advocate for their meaningful participation in achieving the SDGs. Recognizing their importance, the UN prioritized youth engagement as a key pillar of the system-wide Youth 2030: UN Youth Strategy³.

With the largest youth demographic in history, their engagement in achieving the SDGs is critical to fostering inclusivity and building a lasting, peaceful, and just world, especially in a time marked by the highest levels of conflict since the Second World War⁴. The United Nations Secretary-General identified it as a pressing need during his remarks to the General Assembly on priorities for 2024⁵, further highlighting the significance of meaningful youth engagement.

As we stand at the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda, it is crucial to assess the progress and recalibrate strategies towards achieving the SDGs. The youth, peace and security (YPS) agenda, stemming from the United Nations Security Council resolution 2250 (UNSCR 2250, 2015), acts as an additional powerful catalyst to advance the SDGs. Long before the resolution came to light, young people across the globe had actively participated in grassroots peacebuilding initiatives within their communities. This agenda marks a shift in recognizing young people's role in peace and security, moving beyond seeing them as victims or perpetrators of violence but acknowledging them as essential stakeholders in peacebuilding efforts.

The YPS agenda is particularly intertwined with SDGs through its key pillars, namely participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and disengagement and reintegration. Both agendas strive to ensure **inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making** which involves young people. The emphasis on **protecting and respecting human rights** is enshrined in both normative frameworks which promote **violence prevention activities**, particularly through intercultural dialogue, to create conditions necessary for sustainable development and ensuring peaceful societies. In addition, both agendas rely on **establishing robust partnerships** and catalyzing concerted and collaborative efforts between governments, civil society, and young people to ensure shared responsibility and actions in advancing the agendas. Lastly, both agendas promote creating decent employment and education **opportunities to disengage and reintegrate** young people from armed conflict. Peace, development, and humanitarian needs are mutually dependent, with ongoing conflicts reversing development progress and increasing humanitarian needs. There is growing international consensus that efforts to address these needs must be anchored in peace, with human rights playing a central role in advancing both development and peace⁶. Furthermore, **by recognizing the nexus between the YPS agenda and SDGs, we can harness the contributions of the youth to drive meaningful progress towards a more peaceful and sustainable future.**

³ The Youth 2030 Strategy prioritizes Engagement, Participation, and Advocacy to amplify youth voices for a peaceful and sustainable world. This involves integrating youth engagement across UN entities, enhancing collaboration with youth-led organizations, providing guidance for establishing youth engagement mechanisms, and advocating for meaningful youth participation in global SDG forums. Learn more here: https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/18-00080_UN-Youth-Strategy_Web.pdf.

⁴ United Nations, "With Highest Number of Violent Conflicts Since Second World War, United Nations Must Rethink Efforts to Achieve, Sustain Peace, Speakers Tell Security Council", press release, 26 January 2023. Available at <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15184.doc.htm>.

⁵ United Nations, "Secretary-General's remarks to the General Assembly on Priorities for 2024", 07 February 2024. Available at <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2024-02-07/secretary-generals-remarks-the-general-assembly-priorities-for-2024-scroll-down-for-bilingual-delivered-all-english-version>.

⁶ United Nations, "Humanitarian, Development and Peace Nexus," Available at <https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/content/humanitarian-development-and-peace-nexus>.

1.2 Peace as a Precondition to Sustainable Development

Achieving all 17 SDGs is paramount to transforming the world and lives of all people for the better. Although the YPS agenda has the potential to contribute to realizing all of them, this paper focuses on its power to advance **SDGs 4 (Quality Education), 5 (Gender Equality), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions)**. The interconnectedness of these SDGs and YPS is undeniable. If successful, the world will have better skilled and educated (young) people, more (young) women in leadership positions, improved relations between diverse communities and just, transparent, and accountable institutions, all of which are essential for lasting peace. On the contrary, if unattained, large inequalities in access to quality education can easily become a source of tension, significantly increasing society's risk of experiencing violent conflict⁷. Multiple forms of discrimination compounded with social, economic, and political exclusions that often affect young people, particularly young women, hinder their equal and effective participation in decision-making, inevitably negatively impacting any peacebuilding efforts. For that reason, being a passive bystander in processes of positive change is not an option.

The scale and aspirations of the SDGs require multifaceted efforts as well as committed partnerships. If the 2030 Agenda midpoint review taught us anything, it is that a whole-of-society engagement is critical to success. Multiple streams of action as well as coordinated efforts are necessary to achieve any significant gains in realizing the SDGs. Therefore, a well-rounded strategy for advancing the goals of YPS and achieving the SDGs is required.

The synergy between YPS advocacy and programming work can be leveraged to maximize the impact and better address today's multidimensional challenges and complex crises. Advocacy and policy initiatives are the vehicles on the road to achieve the SDGs as they provide the frameworks and political commitment needed to drive change at local, national, and global levels. Programmatic efforts, meanwhile, equip young people with critical skills and capacities to lead effectively and implement impactful initiatives.

In this regard, the Youth Office focuses on raising awareness, mobilizing support, engaging stakeholders, as well as implementing advocacy initiatives on youth issues to influence the development of policies for young people. Correspondingly, carefully designed programmes have the potential to support young people in strengthening and developing critical skills and competencies to support leadership, project management and organizational development. UNAOC emphasizes the importance of capacity-building of young people and youth-led organizations to effectively implement initiatives advancing intercultural and interreligious understanding, thereby supporting the advancement of the 2030 Agenda, and building sustainable peace.

This paper explores the advocacy initiatives led by the United Nations Youth Office (Youth Office) (2022-2024) and the ongoing programmatic initiatives implemented by United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) and spotlights the role of youth engagement in achieving the SDGs. It highlights young people's strengths and showcases their contributions to sustainable development and peace. Additionally, the paper explores relevant examples of YPS efforts and analyzes how they have advanced the SDGs from both advocacy and programming perspectives.

Addressing the underexplored connections between the YPS agenda and SDGs, this paper acknowledges the challenges of young people's meaningful participation and representation, particularly for young women. Ultimately, the goal is to provide recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of YPS initiatives in contributing to the broader sustainable development agenda. The following chapter highlights some of the UNAOC- and Youth Office-led YPS-related programming and advocacy activities contributing to the realization of specified SDGs. Additional examples are provided in the annex attached to this thematic paper.

⁷ Marlies Sas, Koen Ponnet, Genserik Reiers and Wim Hardyn: "The Role of Education in the Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Developing Countries", Sustainability 2020, vol.12, 2320.



Under-Secretary-General Miguel Ángel Moratinos with UNAOC Youth Alumni at the 10th UNAOC Global Forum in Cascais, Portugal.

Photo: UNAOC



THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND THE YOUTH, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA

2.1 SDG 4: Education for a Culture of Peace: Synergies Between Education and Peacebuilding

“ Our journeys and our timelines should never be a comparison. It is defined by how we adapt, learn and grow. There are different types of learning: ones focused on knowledge and others on skills. Problem-solving skills to navigate challenges, collaboration to build connections, adaptability to embrace change, empathy to truly understand others...these are critical 21st century skills that are often overlooked in traditional classroom settings. ”

Giovanni Fitzroy Jean Charles, Saint Lucia, UNAOC Young Peacebuilders Programme 2022

The current education systems are failing young people as they are not fit for purpose. Around the world, education is vastly lacking content related to human rights, a culture of peace and non-violence, gender equality, global citizenship, and sustainable development. Young people go through rigid curriculums without acquiring the skills needed to respond to current challenges such as the sharp rise in stigma, polarization, racism, and hate speech against vulnerable communities, online and offline. The world is rapidly changing, yet our institutions and systems do not match its pace. Young people learn more from the internet and social media than from books. They consume online content, including violent ideologies and narratives, without questioning the sources, accuracy, or legitimacy. This presents an enormous challenge to improving our educational systems.

Teaching about universal values of compassion, mutual respect, diversity, and human dignity can provide young people with the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to lead productive lives, make informed choices and decisions, and assume active roles in resolving global challenges, including issues of peace and security. Developing peacebuilding capacities of young people is therefore a foundation block of the YPS agenda as well as of comprehensive education fit for the 21st century.

Since its inception, UNAOC has recognized education as a core component of any healthy, diverse, just and inclusive society, making education one of the pillars of its work. The focus lies on empowering and engaging young people to enhance their resilience to negative narratives and strengthen their abilities to foster greater awareness, mutual respect, understanding and long-term positive relationships between peoples of different cultures and religions. Through targeted training and workshops, UNAOC provides young people with practical skills and competencies

Young Peacebuilders participant
Giovanni Fitzroy Jean Charles at the UNAOC
Youth Forum in Cascais, Portugal.

Photo: UNAOC

for intercultural dialogue and cooperation as well as opportunities for knowledge exchange around topics such as human rights, culture of peace and non-violence, gender equality, global citizenship, and sustainable development, thereby contributing to the realization of **SDG target 4.7**.

One example is the **UNAOC Young Peacebuilders programme**, a peace education initiative that creates a safe space to support young people in gaining knowledge and skills in order to enhance their positive role in issues of peace, security and preventing violent extremism. The tailor-made blended curriculum allows programme participants to work on specific issues related to peacebuilding and conflict prevention and encourages them to initiate grassroots projects in their respective communities. The multicultural nature of the programme promotes global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity, enabling participants to overcome preconceived negative stereotypes and prejudices and learn first-hand about different countries and cultures. **Since 2016, 140 young peacebuilders (aged 18–25 years) from 49 countries in West Africa, the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean have completed the programme.**

Education plays a foundational role in fostering peace, as highlighted through UNAOC's programming efforts. Beyond providing knowledge and skills, education equips young people to navigate complex social, cultural, and political landscapes, which enables them to act as agents of positive change. These efforts are not only evident in capacity-building initiatives but also in policy-level processes where young people have led transformative efforts to reimagine education systems.

For instance, young people took the lead in a global inclusive process in 2022, coordinated by the Youth Office and partners, to gather recommendations for transforming education. This initiative engaged 450,000 youth from over 170 countries, supporting **SDG target 4.5**, which promotes equal access to education for all, including marginalized groups. The process culminated in the **Youth Declaration on Transforming Education**, a landmark document outlining youth demands for an education framework rooted in peace and human rights. It addressed **SDG target 4.a** for safe, inclusive learning spaces and **SDG target 4.7** by advocating for education that fosters human rights, peace, and cultural appreciation. The document was formally presented to the United Nations Secretary-General, demonstrating the ability of young people to lead and shape global education priorities.

To implement these recommendations, the Youth Office partnered with UNESCO and the SDG4Youth & Students Network to launch the **Global Youth Initiative on Transforming Education**. This initiative empowers youth to actively participate in education policymaking processes, ensuring their insights drive necessary reforms.

Key takeaways:

Education is central to achieving both SDG 4 and the YPS agenda, equipping young people with the skills and values needed to contribute to peace and development. Programming and advocacy efforts must be implemented concurrently and in a complementary manner. It is not enough to have highly skilled and educated young people without platforms for meaningful engagement, nor to provide spaces at decision-making tables without adequately equipping youth to navigate complex political agendas. Advocacy ensures that youth perspectives are integrated into policies promoting equitable, inclusive, and quality education. Meanwhile, programmatic efforts focus on equipping young people with the tools and capacities needed to lead effectively at the grassroots level. A balanced strategy is essential: safe, inclusive learning environments must go hand in hand with efforts to equip young people for active roles in shaping policies and initiatives.



2.2 SDG 5: Empowering Young Women as Leaders in Peace and Development: Advancing Gender Equality Through Youth Engagement

“ Recognizing women, their knowledge and allowing them the resources needed to implement transformative and sustainable solutions is not only an act of justice but also a crucial step towards preserving our planet and life on earth. ”

Xiomara Acevedo, Colombia, UNAOC Intercultural Innovation Hub recipient 2023

Gender equality and the empowerment of young women and girls may appear elusive, given the stark reality that women are twice as likely to face discrimination based on gender⁸. Emerging global crises have exacerbated existing gender inequalities, impacting access to health care, education, and economic opportunities. Young women and girls bear disproportionate burdens in times of conflict, contending with the persistent threats of intimidation, sexual violence, and gender-based violence. In most countries, the gender gap in power and leadership positions is deeply embedded in local systems, with no signs of improvement in sight.

Various studies⁹ have increasingly revealed the multifaceted roles women and young women play in countering violent extremism, emphasizing the imperative need for their inclusion in peacebuilding, decision-making, and reconstruction activities. Nevertheless, their engagement is often marginalized, overlooking their potential as peacebuilders with unique abilities, skills and experiences. Peace will never be achieved without a comprehensive dialogue that includes women.

One approach that directly responds to these needs is the **Young Women Peacebuilders** initiative, launched in 2022 by United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) in collaboration with UNAOC, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The pilot provided capacity-building training for 20 young women from conflict and crisis-affected countries to strengthen their knowledge and expertise in peacebuilding, sustaining peace and preventing violent extremism. Tailored gender- and age-sensitive support helps reduce discrimination against women's involvement in peace and security matters, thus contributing to achieving **SDG target 5.1**. It created space for peer-exchange, networking, sharing of best practices and lessons learned, enabling the young women to interact in a safe environment. The skills acquired revealed new possibilities for funding, job opportunities and enhanced quality of their own capacity building efforts. The initiative opened up unprecedented exposure and access to the United Nations at local and global levels, offering visibility of their peacebuilding work and space to brief Member States and the Security Council through Arria Formula meetings.

⁸ United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2023 (New York, 2023), p. 5.

⁹ UN Women, A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 (2015)

Xiomara Acevedo at the 2023 Intercultural Innovation Hub Ceremony in Berlin, Germany.

Photo: UNAOC

Shining a spotlight on young women's contribution to peace and development is a critical component of the YPS agenda, as much as it is a necessity for elevating their full and effective participation in political, economic, and public life, thus helping to reach SDG target 5.5.

Key takeaways:

Advancing gender equality and empowering young women are essential to achieving SDG 5 and the YPS agenda. Advocacy amplifies their voices in policymaking in order to drive structural changes that promote equal participation in peacebuilding and decision-making. Meanwhile, programmatic initiatives equip young women with the skills, networks, and platforms needed to lead effectively at local and global levels. Advocacy and programming initiatives create an enabling environment, while ensuring young women have the tools to navigate it. Breaking systemic barriers and providing tailored support are critical to unlocking their potential as leaders in peace and development. Only through sustained, strategic efforts can young women fully contribute to building a more inclusive and peaceful future.



Participants of the Young Women Peacebuilders, initiative of UN Women in collaboration with UNAOC, UNFPA and UNICEF. Photo: UN Women



2.3 SDG 10: Tackling Discrimination and Reducing Inequalities Through Youth Leadership: Addressing Inequalities for Inclusive Peace

“ Inclusion is not just about providing opportunities but also about intentionally creating spaces where everyone feels and knows they belong. ”

Nozipho Mahlalela, Eswatini, Global Sports Programme

Reducing inequalities within and among countries and people remains a huge challenge. The minimal progress achieved over the past three decades has been scratched by the COVID-19 pandemic which triggered the largest increase in inequalities between countries. While inequality is in no way a direct cause of conflict, we know that it can lead to tensions when it overlaps with differences in access and opportunities across groups of different identities¹⁰. Discrimination has risen to alarming levels. Recent years have witnessed the rise of discrimination against various groups and hate crimes targeting vulnerable populations, further exacerbated by various natural and human-caused disasters, revealing that no society is spared. This is a slippery slope as growing intolerance, hate speech, xenophobia and discrimination pose an enormous threat to international peace and security as they fuel tensions, becoming the catalyst for polarization and radicalization.

The United Nations Secretary-General is frequently calling for stronger investments in social cohesion to ensure diverse communities feel respected¹¹. One of the strategies for constructing social cohesion and peace among nations is an inter-cultural dialogue based on mutual respect. Through various programmes, UNAOC empowers young people and youth-led organizations globally to contribute to issues of peace and security by fostering understanding and collaboration between people of different cultural backgrounds with the goal of combating hate speech and discrimination and preventing violent conflict.

The **Youth Solidarity Fund (YSF)** is one of UNAOC's flagship initiatives that contributes to reducing inequalities by providing partnership, capacity-building and financial means to youth-led organizations to implement activities that prevent violent

¹⁰ United Nations, "Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 9: A New Agenda for Peace", July 2023, p 6.

¹¹ A/78/80-E/2023/64 <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/report/2023/secretary-general-sdg-report-2023--EN.pdf>

conflict, promote peace and foster social cohesion through intercultural and interfaith dialogue. YSF targets youth-led organizations in the countries receiving Official Development Assistance (ODA) that do not have the same access to funding and training opportunities as their counterparts in donor countries, pitching in to **SDG target 10.2** by supporting their inclusion in social and political affairs. Since its inception in 2008, YSF has funded 80 youth-led organizations in 43 countries, representing a total of 2.59 million US dollars in investments.

Emergencies and crises further deepen existing inequalities, disproportionately impacting marginalized groups, such as persons with disabilities. After the devastating earthquake in Türkiye-Syria in February 2023, emergency responders focused on addressing the needs of the affected population. Young persons with disabilities were identified as one of the most affected groups: either youth who acquired a disability due to the earthquake, or youth with disabilities who faced increased isolation after the earthquake. To address these inequalities, the Youth2030 Disability Task Team, under the leadership of the Youth Office and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), together with the Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action, developed a **Checklist to ensure the meaningful participation of young persons with disabilities in local humanitarian response**¹². Türkiye's UN Country Team has disseminated the Checklist with humanitarian actors, and UNFPA's Syria Hub is currently piloting it. This work directly supports **SDG target 10.2**, advancing the inclusion of young people with disabilities, and **SDG target 10.3**, promoting fairness by removing discriminatory barriers and reducing inequalities. Initially designed for the Türkiye-Syria crisis, this tool now serves a broader purpose, empowering young persons with disabilities in other humanitarian contexts and promoting equal opportunities for all.

Key takeaways:

Inclusive societies are central to both the 2030 Agenda and the YPS agenda, but they are hindered by discrimination, hate speech, and intolerance. Programmatic and advocacy initiatives address these barriers by fostering constructive dialogue, which promotes understanding and collaboration across diverse cultures. Advocacy empowers young people to participate in and shape inclusive policies, while programmatic efforts create spaces for grassroots action, bridging gaps between policy and practice.

For example, the Youth Solidarity Fund (YSF) empowers youth-led organizations in underserved regions to foster intercultural and interfaith understanding, while the Checklist ensures young people with disabilities are not excluded from crisis response and recovery efforts. These initiatives reinforce the principle that no one should be left behind, neither in peacetime nor during crises.

¹² Youth2030 Disability Task Team, "Checklist to ensure the meaningful engagement of young persons with disabilities in humanitarian action." Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/checklist-ensure-meaningful-engagement-young-persons-disabilities-humanitarian-action-november-2023>



UNAOC Fellow Ghada Zribi
at the Fellowship Alumni Event
in New York, 2019.

Photo: UNAOC



Heela Yoon, Young Leader for the SDGs.

Photo: UN Youth Office

2.4 SDG 16: Empowering Youth to Lead in Peacebuilding and Decision-Making: Promoting Inclusive Societies for Sustainable Peace



Often, young people are viewed as perpetrators of violence, not change-makers. Yet in many countries we see that young people are the key drivers of sustainable peace and long-term solutions. To achieve the SDGs and sustainable peace, we must involve young people, especially young women, and girls, in decision-making processes.



Heela Yoon, Afghanistan, Young Leader for the SDGs

One quarter of humanity lives in conflict-affected areas and as of September 2023, more than 114 million people worldwide have been forced to flee their homes due to conflict, persecution, and human rights violations¹³. To make the situation worse, young people are hit particularly hard, facing additional hurdles in accessing justice, basic services, and opportunities to be legitimately represented in public institutions. Structural barriers, inequalities, and other emerging human rights challenges are putting peaceful and inclusive societies further out of reach.

It is evident that young people are not indifferent to these circumstances, constantly finding new and innovative pathways towards strengthening constructive relationships across cultural, ethnic, religious, and national boundaries using arts, culture, sports, social media, and new technologies for peace. Moreover, an increasing number of youth voices are being heard across various inter-governmental processes, enabling them to share their experiences and perspectives from a fresh angle. But it is not enough. The demand far exceeds the supply when it comes to opportunities for young people to meaningfully contribute to processes that matter.

UNAOC is committed to creating a broader space for dialogue for young people as a means of empowering them to combat radicalization, violent extremism and reduce all forms of violence —core goals aligned with SDG 16. The **PLURAL+ Youth Video Festival** is a joint creative initiative of UNAOC and the International Organization for Migration that encourages global youth to explore the issues of migration, diversity, social inclusion, and the prevention of xenophobia through artistic multimedia production. Since 2009, PLURAL+ has received original videos from more than 100 countries and recognized over 400 of them for their power to convey strong messages promoting more inclusive and safer societies. The majority of videos reflect on threats that compromise the global stability and security triggered by discrimination, intolerance, and cultural and religious divides. These efforts directly support **SDG target 16.1**, which aims to significantly reduce violence, and **SDG target 10.2**, which focuses on promoting the inclusion of all people, irrespective of cultural or economic backgrounds. PLURAL+ builds on the participation

¹³ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "2023 Mid-Year Trends", p.6. Available at <https://www.unhcr.org/mid-year-trends-report-2023>

and prevention pillars of UNSCR 2250 as a platform that celebrates and disseminates the positions of young people on global affairs. With a network of over 50 partner organizations, the Programme amplifies young voices and offers a unique space for self-expression on sensitive issues. By disseminating these youth-produced innovative videos, PLURAL+ sparks curiosity and inspires people across generations to take actions in their own communities, thereby fostering peaceful societies.

At the **Summit of the Future Youth Action Day** in September 2024, the Youth Office championed inclusive and youth-responsive governance. Key recommendations included creating an intergenerational dialogue platform to bridge generational divides in policymaking and introducing youth engagement metrics in national SDG reporting to institutionalize youth participation and promote intergenerational equity, supporting SDG 16.7 on inclusive decision-making. The Youth Action Day also emphasized the critical role of peace as a prerequisite for achieving the SDGs. Young peacebuilders, supported by the Youth Office, advocated for systemic reforms to address the root causes of conflict and violence, highlighting the importance of fully implementing UN Security Council Resolution 2250. Proposals included empowering youth in global security decision-making through initiatives such as the Peacebuilding Architecture Review and Security Council reform, addressing systemic barriers, and closing financing gaps that limit youth participation. Additional recommendations called for increased and flexible funding for youth-led peacebuilding, greater institutional support for youth-led organizations, and integrating youth into decision-making roles at all levels. Through these efforts, the Youth Office aims to empower young people and foster inclusive societies where youth play a central role in advancing sustainable peace and development.

Key takeaways:

Inclusive societies are crucial for achieving SDG 16 and sustainable peace, yet young people often face barriers to meaningful participation, particularly in decision-making processes. Advocacy and programmatic initiatives are essential for fostering inclusive governance and empowering youth as agents of change. Advocacy ensures that youth perspectives shape global and national policy discussions, while programmatic efforts focus on building youth capacity and creating platforms for meaningful engagement. Initiatives such as PLURAL+ Youth Video Festival and the Youth Action Day provide opportunities for young people to share their recommendations and influence policymaking. Meaningfully engaging youth in decision-making processes and peacebuilding enhances their empowerment and reinforces their sense of ownership and agency.



UN Secretary-General Mr. António Guterres and youth participants at the Opening of the Summit of the Future Youth Action Day.

Photo: UN Youth Office



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is an undeniable link between the implementation of the YPS agenda and the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, as they mutually reinforce each other to build sustainable peace. As demonstrated in the examples, both programmatic and advocacy initiatives aligned with the YPS agenda's pillars have the potential to concretely contribute to the advancement of the SDGs in collaboration with young people. However, to maximize impact and address today's global multifaceted crises, we must further leverage this synergy. Our approach must be multi-pronged, focusing on education reform, inclusive participation, and targeted capacity-building, in collaboration with the UN system, funders, civil society organizations (CSOs), governments, and youth themselves. The rapidly evolving world, intensified by the advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI), requires an education system that evolves equally rapidly. Our current systems often fail to address the development of socio-emotional skills and competencies needed for the 21st century, thereby jeopardizing global peace and security as classrooms often reflect the immediate community and a larger society. This gap leaves current and future generations ill-equipped and without the means to deal with conflicts and disagreements and learn to live in peace¹⁴.

Moreover, with the increasing tensions, violence, conflicts, and wars, global security and stability are threatened, making peace more fragile and elusive. Young people face frequent instances of stigma, biases, and bigotry. Discrimination, though not a new phenomenon, has multiple layers and intersecting characteristics that are still hard for many to see and acknowledge. This perpetuates the vicious cycle of inequalities and unfairness. Young women, in particular, face compounded disadvantages, being constantly undervalued, undermined and underrepresented globally. It is time to shatter the glass ceiling and help more young women reach their leadership potential, particularly in decision-making spheres which often do not reflect the diversity of the societies they represent.

Since 2015, we have seen a considerable improvement in spaces and opportunities for young people to participate in intergovernmental forums and events, allowing them to speak up and share their personal insights and experiences related to global matters. Practically every international conference, global agenda or multilateral engagement invites young people to take

¹⁴ Creative Associates International, <https://www.creativeassociatesinternational.com/insights/teaching-peace-the-importance-of-social-emotional-learning-in-schools/>

part, however, their participation often remains superficial and tokenistic. Inclusion and representation are still major obstacles, with only a few privileged young people sharing the spotlight.

While progress made thus far is commendable, we cannot stay complacent. Throughout the drafting process of this thematic paper, we not only reflected on the impact of UNAOC programmes and advocacy initiatives of the Youth Office, but we considered the current peacebuilding efforts more broadly. Based on the experiences of UNAOC and the Youth Office, our analysis prompts us to propose the following **recommendations** to accelerate achieving SDGs and simultaneously advancing the YPS agenda:

1. Ensure thorough follow-up on inputs, insights, and recommendations of young people in policy documents, declarations, and resolutions. Meaningful engagement requires not only consultation but also concrete follow-up on youth contributions.
2. Provide targeted and tailored capacity-building opportunities to equip young people with the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate and influence complex political and social landscapes. Building leadership capacities ensures youth can effectively engage in decision-making at all levels.
3. Advocate and mobilize flexible funding and resourcing for youth-led projects and initiatives. Sustained support is essential to foster local peacebuilding, innovation, and the scalability of grassroots efforts.
4. Establish accessible platforms that prioritize marginalized, underrepresented, and vulnerable youth. Efforts must go beyond tokenism to proactively engage those most often excluded from peacebuilding and decision-making processes.
5. Leverage new technologies and social media to cultivate substantive discussions and broaden the reach of youth advocacy.
6. Invest in systemic reform. Tackle structural barriers such as educational inequities, systemic discrimination, and underrepresentation in leadership. Advocate for institutional reforms and intergenerational governance mechanisms to enhance youth participation.

Having open spaces for dialogue is not enough. Investments must also provide funding, access to networks, and capacity-building support for young people to implement their peacebuilding initiatives and change narratives. Let us not forget that none of us can do this alone. Fostering trust among young people, governments, civil society, and international bodies is essential for cohesive and effective peacebuilding.

As Kofi Annan famously stated, “There is no development without peace, and no peace without development.” Young people are central to achieving both, yet their potential remains underutilized due to systemic barriers and limited opportunities. The path forward requires moving beyond symbolic inclusion to meaningful partnerships that empower youth to drive change. Through integrating the YPS agenda into broader development efforts, we can address the root causes of conflict, reduce inequalities, and build inclusive, peaceful societies. Trust, sustained investment, and genuine collaboration will unlock the full potential of young people, advancing the SDGs and ensuring a more equitable and secure future for all.



*PLURAL+ Recipient Yein Han
at the 2023 PLURAL+ Ceremony in New York.
Photo: UNAOC*

ANNEX

This section provides additional examples of programmatic and advocacy initiatives that demonstrate the interconnections between the YPS agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals.

4 QUALITY EDUCATION



SDG 4: Education for Culture of Peace

The **UNAOC Fellowship Programme** fosters intercultural and interfaith understanding by promoting collaboration among young civil society leaders from Europe, North America, the Middle East, and North Africa. This initiative challenges stereotypes and shifts perceptions by providing participants with opportunities for cultural immersion and first-hand exposure to the diverse challenges, cultures, and faiths of different countries. Through direct engagement with a wide range of stakeholders, UNAOC fellows collectively explore opportunities for collaboration and exchange innovative ideas to address global challenges and bridge divides between people of various faiths and cultures. Since its inception in 2010, the programme has selected 283 young leaders from 50 countries, recognizing their professional achievements and dedication to advancing intercultural understanding.

5 GENDER EQUALITY



SDG 5: Empowering Young Women as Leaders in Peace and Development

The **Young Leaders for the SDGs** initiative, launched by the Youth Office in 2016, elevates youth leadership by engaging 17 exceptional young people from diverse backgrounds, including many young women. These leaders advocate for gender equality and contribute to SDG target 5.5 by increasing women's representation in leadership roles. Their activities range from addressing gender-based violence to closing education gaps through advocacy, research, and innovative projects.

Since 2023, the Young Leaders have participated in over 350 global and regional events, such as the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development and the UN General Assembly. Their efforts highlight the interconnectedness of gender equality and the broader SDG agenda, emphasizing youth-driven action in policy advocacy and grassroots engagement.

10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES



SDG 10: Tackling Discrimination and Reducing Inequalities Through Youth Leadership

At the local level, UNAOC runs a project **"News Generation Against Hate: Empowering Local Youth to Create Alternative Narratives and Champion Diversity in the Media"**. Implemented in partnership with the municipality of La Courneuve in Paris, the project engages local youth in efforts to change the negative narrative that surrounds the inhabitants of this diverse community. Young people are trained to enhance their intercultural and media literacy skills so they can develop their own alternative narratives to online and offline misinformation and hate speech. By expanding their understanding and knowledge of key principles of intercultural and interreligious dialogue, young people are better equipped to lead the municipality's dialogue initiatives and

better engage in key peace, security, and local decision-making processes. This initiative supports SDG target 10.2 by promoting the social, economic, and political inclusion of all regardless of ethnicity, religion, or economic status, among others.

The Youth Office partnered with the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation (DHF) to launch the first **research on the implementation of the Youth2030 Strategy**. This research¹⁵ focused on advancing Priority Areas 4 and 5 of Youth2030, particularly on human rights, peace, and resilience-building, within the Gambia UN Country Team. To validate the findings, the Gambia UN Country Team organized a national youth consultation that brought together over 100 young people. This consultation prioritized the inclusion of diverse voices, particularly young women peacebuilders, and youth with disabilities. The initiative, through its recommendations, contributes to SDG 10, specifically target 10.3, by addressing systemic inequalities and promoting inclusive policies that ensure fair treatment for all, regardless of background or ability. DHF published the key conclusions and recommendations in a thematic paper in 2024. To amplify these findings, the Youth Office, UNFPA, and DHF hosted a high-level virtual roundtable discussion in June 2024.



SDG 16: Empowering Youth to Lead in Peacebuilding and Decision-Making

The **Global Programme on Security of Major Sporting Events and Promotion of Sport and its Values as a Tool to Prevent Violent Extremism** is an initiative of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism in partnership with UNAOC, the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, and the International Centre for Sport Security. With a major input from young people, the Programme developed innovative policies and practices to strengthen the protection of major sporting events through enhanced international cooperation, public-private partnerships and sustainable security approaches while promoting the values of sport as a powerful means to counter terrorism and prevent violent extremism (PVE). Through a series of high-level events, forums, campaigns and capacity-building workshops, the Programme facilitated access of young people to decision-making processes while promoting their full and meaningful participation. The understanding of respect for human dignity, pluralism and diversity through sports and physical activities to prevent and discourage their participation in acts of terrorism and violent extremism conducive to terrorism, violence, xenophobia, and all forms of discrimination¹⁶, were later highlighted during the eighth biennial review of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in June 2023. The programme enabled young people to exchange views on how the 13th African Games could be leveraged to promote peace and counteract the appeal of violent extremism on the continent. Together with the Local Organizing Committee and government officials, they discussed the added value of including youth in the organization and delivery of major sporting events and PVE-related activities, and how policymakers can actively seek out and incorporate the diverse experiences and insights of young individuals in decision-making processes.

¹⁵ Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, "Implementing the UN Youth Strategy Lessons from The Gambia." Available at <https://www.daghammarskjold.se/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/dhf-youthstrategygambia.pdf>

¹⁶ United Nations, Office of Counter-Terrorism, "Eighth biennial review of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy". See <https://www.un.org/counterrorism/un-global-counter-terrorism-strategy#:~:text=Resolution%2077%2F298%20requests%20the,by%20the%20United%20Nations%20system>

To foster **meaningful youth participation in peace processes**, the Youth Office has been coordinating a multi-stakeholder partnership involving Member States (Colombia, Finland, and Qatar), civil society, and the United Nations since 2018. This collaborative effort led to the first-of-its-kind International Symposium on Youth Participation in Peace Processes in 2019. The resulting **“WE ARE HERE” Global Policy Paper** outlined a three-layer model of youth engagement: In the Room, Around the Room, and Outside the Room, directly supporting SDG target 16.7. This model informed the **High-Level Global Conference on Youth-Inclusive Peace Processes**¹⁷ in 2022, where Member States committed to integrating youth perspectives into national peacebuilding policies¹⁸.

Additionally, the **YPS Guide for Public Officials** and a five-year strategy were launched to facilitate meaningful youth contributions to peace and security, supporting SDG target 16.6 (effective and transparent institutions). The guide provides practical tools for integrating youth perspectives into decision-making, and an international steering group was established in 2023 to advance its implementation¹⁹.

The **Global Report on Protecting Young People in Civic Space**, titled “If I Disappear,” highlighted the risks faced by young activists. Released by the Youth Office and partners, the report supported SDG target 16.1 (reducing violence) by advocating for better protection mechanisms. The subsequent creation of a Protection Working Group has ensured coordinated global efforts to safeguard young activists’ civic engagement.

Building on the Global Report, the Youth Office, in collaboration with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, conducted the first **internal study on integrating youth and the YPS agenda in UN Peacekeeping Operations (PKOs)**. The study mapped best practices in areas such as gender and climate action, contributing to SDG target 16.6 by promoting accountable institutions that incorporate youth perspectives. It also offered recommendations to enhance youth inclusion within the UN peace and security framework, supporting SDG target 16.7 on inclusive decision-making. A key outcome was the creation of a **YPS Learning Forum** for PKO staff, aimed at fostering knowledge exchange and collaboration, set to launch in December 2024 with support from the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) and DPO. A “Snapshots” version of the study, published in 2023, summarizes key findings and serves as a practical guide for integrating youth-sensitive practices in peacekeeping²⁰.

¹⁷ The Global Conference was hosted by the Governments of the State of Qatar, Finland, and Colombia, as well as co-organized by the United Nations Office of the Secretary General’s Envoy on Youth, and Search for Common Ground in partnership with the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (PBSO/DPPA), UN Women, UNDP, UNFPA, Education Above All, and the United Network of Young Peacebuilders.

¹⁸ Joint Statement of the Governments of the State of Qatar, Colombia, and Finland: <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/YPS-Joint-Statement.pdf>

¹⁹ Co-chaired by the Youth Office, DPPA, and Search for Common Ground, the group supports collaborative efforts to realize the strategy’s objectives.

²⁰ Independent Snapshots Series: Advancing the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda in UN Peacekeeping Operations. See <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/YPS-agenda-in-UN-PKOs.pdf>



CONTRIBUTING TO THE REALIZATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS THROUGH THE YOUTH, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA

Thematic Paper developed by
the **United Nations Alliance of Civilizations**
and the **United Nations Youth Office**

