

Young people and pre-formal peacemaking

Tapping into technology

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Young people are a majority in many countries affected by violent conflict. Yet they are seldom included in peace processes. Following United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolutions 2250 (2015) and 2419 (2018) on Youth, Peace and Security, the UN commissioned a global policy paper called *We are here: an integrated approach to youth-inclusive peace processes* (2019) – one of the contributors is also an author of this *Accord* article. The policy paper proposes three ways to understand young people's involvement in peace processes – 'in', 'around' and 'outside' the peace 'room'. However, it also stresses that youth *involvement* in peace processes does not equate to youth *influence*.

Young people's involvement in peace initiatives needs to be approached through an intersectional lens, inclusive of identity, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity,

socio-economic status and disability, among other factors. Common stereotypes portray young men as perpetrators of violence and young women as passive victims. Young women are often marginalised from peace spaces earmarked both for women and for youth – deemed too young for the Women, Peace and Security agenda, while not considered in youth-related issues where young men tend to dominate. The definition of youth is itself contested: UNSCR 2250 describes young people as aged 18–29, however there are significant definitional and cultural differences across the world.

In reality, in many conflict-affected societies young people are at the forefront in mobilising for peace through rallies and demonstrations, leading efforts for community-level reconciliation, or using arts, social media and information

technology. This article describes some roles that young women and men have played in helping to cultivate peace processes and initiatives in South Sudan, the Philippines and Kenya, looking particularly at their use of information technology.

Broadening participation

Young people have helped to broaden participation in peace dialogue. In South Sudan, following the failure of the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS) of August 2015, a High-Level Revitalization Forum (HLRF) was initiated in 2017 in response to advocacy and demand from civil society. Learning from previous mistakes, civil society coordinated to ensure their participation in the HLRF. A core coordination group was established, which consisted of the South Sudan Civil Society Forum (SSCSF), the South Sudan Women's Coalition for Peace (SSWCP) and the South Sudan Coalition of Youth Organisations (SSCoYO). (For more detail, see the article 'International support for civil society involvement in peacemaking in South Sudan' in this edition.)

The coordination group demanded that civil society be accredited as delegates to the peace negotiation, rather than observers as in the ARCSS process. This was important because it enabled civil society, including young people and women, to have a more equal footing in the process. As observers, civil society had had limited influence, but as delegates representatives could make proposals that would be heard in the room by the political negotiating parties. Civil society presence and competence met a degree of respect and even healthy fear on the part of the political parties, who had little exposure to their way of working.

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The coordination group established a technical support team in January 2018 with sub-groups looking at youth concerns, women's rights and inclusion, security, governance and media. Tech-savvy young women and men were able to encourage public engagement in the process, for example by organising daily public updates through social media channels, including Facebook and WhatsApp. Young people created a virtual 'E-Delegates Forum', which facilitated information flows from the negotiation table to regional capitals, and to designated youth civil society focal points who could communicate with local communities. The media team organised radio interviews with civil society delegates inside the peace negotiations in order to update

the public, and the credibility of civil society helped counter misinformation by some politicians.

The coordination of youth in civil society in the early phases in 2017 helped to diversify the talks. Following lobbying for parity in representation, the parties agreed to women's representation at 35 per cent and youth involvement at 20 per cent. Importantly, this was in all the mechanisms of the peace negotiations and agreement implementation. Young people close to the talks lobbied for wider youth constituencies to be included, 'naming and shaming' parties that did not involve women and young people. Despite being largely confined to supporting roles and with limited funding, young people's technological know-how enabled them to challenge the established hierarchy of the talks.

Mobilising the masses

Young people in Kenya have used information technology and social media to mobilise their peers for peace, subsequently influencing more established peace negotiators. Violence related to the disputed 2007 presidential elections left over 1,100 people dead and more than 600,000 displaced. Nakuru County was a flashpoint for fighting, much of which manifested through the incitement of young people to violence by political elites.

In 2010, in anticipation of another cycle of violence in the upcoming 2013 elections, young people formed the Nakuru County Youth Bunge Association (NCYBA – *bunge* is Swahili for parliament), which represented over 350,000 young people across 1,300 *bunges*. The NCYBA brought together peers from warring communities, acknowledging that both communities had engaged in violence and suffered as a result. When a more formal peace process was initiated by the National Cohesion and Integration Commission in 2010, the NCYBA advocated and negotiated for youth voices to be represented in the talks.

The Nakuru County Peace Accord, signed in August 2012, consequently included clauses for youth participation in decision-making structures, as well as investment in business and education in order to mitigate socio-political drivers of youth engagement in electoral violence. The NCYBA was further able to use its peer-to-peer mobile phone network to dispel inflammatory misinformation, and initiated peace caravans to spread pro-peace messages. As recounted by Alice Nderitu, the 2013 elections were the most peaceful since 1992, with no injuries or deaths.

In South Sudan, young artists created the #Anataban ('I am tired' in Arabic) campaign in 2016 in response to the civil war. In 2017, they launched the 'South Sudan is Watching' public social media campaign to put pressure on the negotiating

parties to reach a comprehensive peace agreement. These campaigns were popular with young people and the South Sudanese diaspora, and referred to by several policymakers, including tweets from the Chair of the African Union, Moussa Faki Mahamat. These creative approaches underscore young people's capacities to generate alternative channels to build public demand for peace before and during formal talks.

Connecting negotiators

In societies where age hierarchy is the norm, it is difficult for young people to get a seat at the negotiating table; where they do, their presence is often tokenistic. Through early engagement in pre-formal phases of peace processes, young women and men can overcome age-related barriers to engage in negotiations, playing critical institutional roles such as providing administrative and technical support, or influencing the substance of the talks and the content of the agreement.

Peace negotiations between the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) went on for 17 years following the first round of talks in 1997, culminating in the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) signed in March 2014. This was never a straight path to peace and there were several 'early phases', as negotiations were subsequently 'rebooted' at least twice – once when a major war erupted in 2000, and again after violence broke out in 2008 with the botched signing of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD).

In all three early phases of the talks, young women and men played important administrative and technical supporting roles in the negotiating secretariats of both the MILF and the government. The presence of young people in the technical secretariat teams supported informal youth-led backchannels between the two negotiating parties, which helped advance trust and understanding.

The story of Johaira Wahab-Manantan is illustrative. Wahab-Manantan was 25 years old when she joined the Government Peace Panel as head of its legal team when talks restarted in 2010. She had previously been involved in civil society advocacy, including making recommendations to the government administration on legal issues relating to the Agreement on Ancestral Domain. One of her key substantive contributions to the dialogue was to ensure the 'right of women to *meaningful* political participation' (emphasis added) when the 'Decision Points on Principles of April 2012' was being negotiated. This principle served as common ground from which the parties launched intense negotiations that led to the CAB in March 2014. This required that women not only be present in talks but that their concerns be heard and taken on board.

A few young people with close informal connections to the MILF played similar supporting roles. Esmael Pasigan, the 26-year-old son of one of the group's ideological founders, for example, was the only person among the elder MILF negotiators who knew how to operate a laptop when peace talks were being explored in 1996. His technological skills gave him early access before a formal process had been fully established. His sustained presence throughout the evolution of the talks meant that he led the MILF in the drafting and negotiation of the Decision Points on Principles at the Technical Committee level in 2012.

Conclusion and recommendations

More and more the focus is shifting from 'why' young people should be involved in peace processes to 'how' they can engage meaningfully – outside, around and in the 'room' where formal negotiations are happening. Experiences of young people in early peace dialogue discussed above stress the significance of technology to open pathways to peace talks. As a generation born into everyday use of information technology, young people have harnessed digital tools and platforms to bring inclusivity and diversity into peace processes that may previously have not been possible. As peacemaking evolves and embraces more use of technology, tech-savvy young people are an asset.

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Outside the room: Young people often use alternative, informal and innovative approaches to influence formal talks from the outside – creating bridges that, for example, connect negotiators in the room to communities affected by violence. Young people have also used these informal spaces to consolidate substantive inputs from youth and women representatives into formal peace talks. Formal peace process actors should see young people as a necessary channel in linking talks to a larger number of actors rather than just as a vulnerable sector that needs to be appeased. The first step to enabling this is by recognising the legitimacy and leverage of youth voices outside the room and using digital technology to open multi-level channels for engagement.

Inside and around the room: It is important to provide spaces for talented young women and men both around and inside the room to provide substantive contributions to the negotiations. This has already been demonstrated by youth movements and leaders who have channelled technological

tools to facilitate inclusion and mediation efforts. Young people can act as informal links ('backchannels'), which are often unencumbered by strict rules, codes of conduct and protocols. The relationships young people create with peers on the other side can serve as important channels for clarifying issues to avoid possible misunderstandings during formal talks. Mediators and facilitators should create spaces and opportunities for young people inside and around the room to engage informally across conflict divides during, before and after formal talks, such as providing them roles in technical committees, a conducive environment for informal engagement, and opportunities to work together and communicate outside the talks.

“ Patriarchal dynamics in youth movements can create cyclical exclusionary norms if not addressed intentionally. ”

Address the exclusions within: Patriarchal dynamics in youth movements can create profound exclusionary norms if not addressed intentionally. When participating in peace processes, young women more often undertake administrative or secretarial work, while young men are already subtly prepared for substantive roles, regardless of their competencies, on an invisible path to leadership positions. Young women, however, gain more confidence in 'engendering' processes if there are more women in the room, as evidenced by research on critical masses. Peace process actors, including mediators and facilitators, should enable an atmosphere during talks that encourages young women in the room to participate substantively, especially – but not only – on issues that will affect them. This can be supported by maintaining a substantial number of women both within and around the room, and ensuring enabling measures for young women to lower the barriers to their inclusion and meaningful participation.