

Beyond the Paperwork: Institutionalizing Youth Agency

UNGA81 Side Event Summary | 23 September 2026

AT A GLANCE

Approximately 40 participants joined in person and 62 participated online on Zoom. Accounting for participants joining and leaving at different points, the event reached an estimated 120 people overall.

Overview

The roundtable examined how to move from youth participation to sustained and meaningful influence over decisions, budgets and implementation pathways for the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda. The discussion brought together government representatives, youth-led organizations and practitioners working across national and local contexts, with perspectives from Madagascar, the Philippines, Italy, Honduras, and Brazil.

The session also introduced key findings from the forthcoming policy brief *From Participation to Influence: Institutionalizing National Pathways for Youth, Peace and Security*, developed by UNDP through the *Youth as Catalysts for Peace* initiative, jointly implemented by UNDP, UNFPA and the UN Youth Office with support from the Government of Italy. The brief emphasizes that there is no single pathway to institutionalizing YPS and that meaningful youth influence requires participation from design through implementation and monitoring, supported by financing, clear responsibilities and accountability mechanisms.

Key Highlights

- **Practical mechanisms can translate YPS commitments into influence.** The Minister of Youth and Sports of Madagascar highlighted youth councils at local, national and regional levels, intergenerational dialogues connecting young people with decision-makers, and training and capacity-building. These mechanisms demonstrate how structured participation can create more sustained pathways for youth influence.
- **YPS is strongest when embedded across government and civil society.** The experience of the Philippines underscored the importance of a whole-of-government and multi-stakeholder approach rather than treating YPS as an isolated agenda. This includes connecting YPS with related policy areas, including preventing violent extremism, violence against children and the rights and participation of Indigenous Peoples, while maintaining a strong focus on gender and the participation of young women.
- **Peacebuilding must connect with everyday needs and local realities.** Examples from Honduras and the wider Latin America region highlighted the importance of linking peacebuilding with people's basic needs. Climate change demonstrates the interconnections between development, peace and security, including through drought, resource pressures and their effects on communities.

- **Young people need structures, resources and decision-making power.** The discussion emphasized that there is no shortage of ideas among young people. The central challenge is creating meaningful avenues for political participation, ensuring adequate and sustainable financing for youth-led initiatives, and establishing mechanisms through which youth participation produces tangible changes in policy and practice.
- **Digital transformation is reshaping participation.** Digital peacebuilding and developments in artificial intelligence are creating new avenues for youth engagement. At the same time, rapidly evolving information environments require greater attention to digital repression, surveillance, the securitization of young people's digital lives and the conditions needed for safe and meaningful participation.
- **Institutionalization requires sustained political commitment.** Italy's experience demonstrated that building consensus around YPS is a long-term process. Structured collaboration, shared ownership, relationship-building and sustained dialogue are essential to advance and institutionalize the agenda.
- **Moving beyond tokenism remains the central test.** Across the discussion, participants returned to the need for genuine youth influence, sustainable resources, accountability and locally grounded, context-specific programming. Young people must be engaged as co-creators throughout design, implementation and monitoring, rather than consulted only after key decisions have been made.

Looking Ahead

The discussion pointed to four priorities for accelerating YPS implementation:

- Invest in national and local mechanisms that give young people a defined role in decision-making.
- Provide dedicated financing and capacity support for youth-led and context-specific initiatives.
- Integrate YPS across relevant government and development frameworks while preserving its focus on youth agency, inclusion and peace.
- Strengthen monitoring and accountability mechanisms so that commitments result in sustainable changes in policy and practice.