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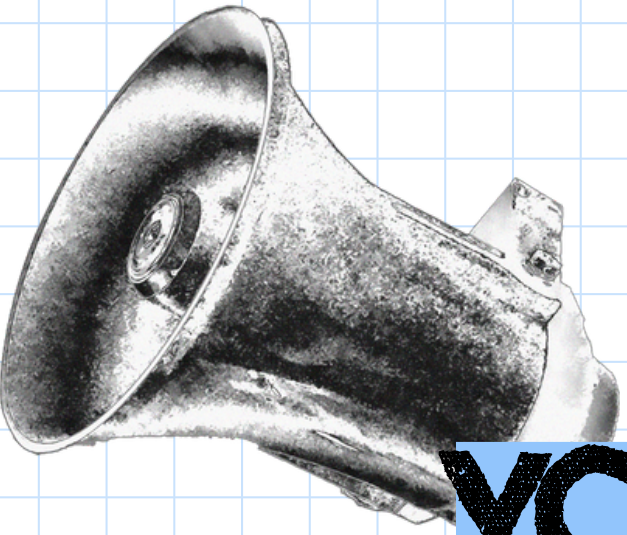

YOUTH AS CATALYSTS FOR PEACE



Summary of Findings from UNDP's Global Online Consultation

24–31 August 2026

Introduction

Despite growing recognition of young people as agents of peace, inclusion, and sustainable development, many continue to face persistent barriers to meaningful participation in governance and peacebuilding processes. To address those challenges, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in collaboration with United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the UN Youth Office, is implementing the project *Youth as Catalysts for Peace*, with the support of the Government of Italy. The project seeks to strengthen youth participation and leadership in governance and peacebuilding processes by supporting the implementation of the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda at country, regional, and global levels.

As part of this effort, UNDP developed a Policy Brief examining national pathways for YPS institutionalization, with a particular focus on National Action Plans (NAPs). The brief explores emerging practices, opportunities and challenges related to the implementation of the YPS agenda at the national level, and analyses the delivery of YPS policies and programmes with country examples.

To inform this work, UNDP convened an online consultation inviting young people, practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and partners to share their experiences and perspectives, including innovative approaches, implementation experiences, challenges, and good practices that could help translate YPS commitments into meaningful and measurable outcomes for young people and their communities.

The online consultation, hosted by UNDP, was conducted through SparkBlue from 24 to 31 August 2026, to gather perspectives from young people, peacebuilders and practitioners across regions. **It drew 342 young people, researchers and activists, generating 67 unique respondent contributions from 28 countries grounded in local and regional lived experiences.**

The overarching sentiment from the comments submitted is a powerful and unified call to shift the paradigm of youth engagement. Respondents overwhelmingly rejected tokenistic or “symbolic” consultations, calling for young people to be recognized and empowered as essential partners in building peace, with meaningful influence and clear accountability mechanisms.

The core findings point to a deep-seated desire for genuine decision-making power, direct access to resources and funding, and holistic, community-led approaches to peacebuilding and governance that connect protection, political participation, and security with economic opportunity, education, and accountable governance, as well as accountability mechanisms in place.

Disclaimer:
Some parts of this summary report have been developed with artificial intelligence (AI) support and reviewed by our UNDP experts.

Methodology

This report is based on comments collected during a youth consultation on the SparkBlue platform. Participants were invited to respond to four guiding questions:

- *Are you aware of any laws, policies, national strategies, action plans, or other formal or informal mechanisms in your country, community, or region that support the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda or enable young people to participate in peace, security, governance, or development processes? If so, based on your experience, how effective have they been in creating meaningful opportunities for young people to influence decisions, policies, peace or reconciliation efforts, and development priorities? What factors have contributed to their success or limited their impact?*

- *What groups, organizations, networks, forums, or platforms in your community, country, or region enable young people to engage in decisions related to peace, security, governance, or other issues that affect their lives? These may include youth councils or parliaments, YPS networks or coalitions, civil society organizations, community dialogues, peace clubs, citizen assemblies, digital participation platforms, or other formal and informal spaces. Please share examples and explain which mechanisms you believe provide genuine opportunities for young people to influence decisions, and what makes them effective.*

- *From your experience, what are the main barriers preventing young people from meaningfully participating in peace and security processes or limiting implementation of the YPS agenda in your community, country, or region? What needs to change to overcome these barriers?*

- *Looking ahead, in your own words, what is the one change you would most like governments, the United Nations or other partners to make to strengthen young people's meaningful participation in peace and security?*

Participants were asked to respond in their own words rather than using artificial intelligence tools, and were able to contribute in their own language through automatic translation options. To distill the authentic voices of the youth participants, comments from moderators were filtered out, and the analysis focused on top-level comments. A thematic analysis was conducted on these comments to identify recurring patterns, priorities, and recommendations.

Key Findings and Thematic Analysis

The consultation revealed the following key themes and findings:

01
Beyond Tokenism: Advancing Meaningful Inclusion and Decision-Making

This was the most dominant feedback, with several participants strongly demanding to move beyond “symbolic” consultations and give youth agency and meaningful roles in decision-making.

> *Young people are often heard, but not always given the authority or resources to act on what they propose.*

Insight: Young people do not see themselves as “leaders of tomorrow” but as active and capable peacebuilders today. Young people are increasingly calling for a shift from symbolic representation to meaningful participation, with substantive roles in decision-making processes.

Key Recommendation: The establishment of permanent, formal structures like **local "Youth Peace Councils"** and designated “youth co-chairs” in existing Peace Councils was proposed by several respondents. These bodies would allow young people from diverse backgrounds to co-design and implement peace initiatives with community leaders, ensuring that youth are “co-owners of the process.” Furthermore, respondents encouraged strengthening the collaboration between existing grassroots structures and formal institutions.

02
Economic Empowerment as a Cornerstone of Peace

A clear and pragmatic connection was drawn between economic opportunity and peace. Participants argued that peace initiatives that ignore economic realities are often destined to fail.

> *When young people are struggling with extreme inflation and unemployment, you cannot expect them to stay engaged in peacebuilding without linking these initiatives to livelihoods.*

Insight: Limited access to jobs and lack of livelihood opportunities were identified as potential drivers of instability, conflict or violence. One respondent commented that “unemployed youths are sometimes used as political thugs” in Nigeria, underscoring the link between youth unemployment and vulnerability to conflict, and reinforcing livelihood creation as a key entry point for peacebuilding.

Key Recommendation: Respondents recommended that peacebuilding programmes be combined with **skills and capacity training, job creation, small business support, and paid community work.** As one participant noted, "A young person with a stable income and a sense of purpose is far less likely to be drawn into violence." There is also a strong call for **direct, flexible grants** to be given to youth-led groups for their projects.



03
Ineffective Policy and a Crisis of Governance

There is widespread disillusionment with existing national and international policy frameworks related to Youth, Peace and Security (YPS). Participants described current policies as "symbolic band-aids" that fail to translate into meaningful action on the ground.

> *On the ground, there is no real budget, zero direct support, and endless bureaucratic hassle just to get permissions to work for peace and community development.*

Insight: The failure of policy is attributed to a combination of corruption, nepotism, a lack of enforcement mechanisms, and a fundamental disconnect from grassroots realities. One respondent from Madagascar commented on the lack of trust, because "politics is often perceived as something belonging to elites, associated with corruption"; similar sentiment was shared by inputs from the Philippines, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nigeria, where allegations of favouritism and corruption have led to frustration amongst young people. One young person from Sudan summarized it as "the biggest barrier is the disconnect between high-level policy dialogues and real action on the ground." In many cases, state institutions are seen not as enablers of peace but as obstacles.

Key Recommendation: According to respondents, policies must be developed with built-in **accountability and tracking mechanisms**. More importantly, they must be co-created with youth from the outset and be flexible enough to adapt to local contexts, rather than being imposed from the top down.



04
The Power of Local, Community-Led Action

Participants emphasized that effective peacebuilding and governance are often rooted at the grassroots level, building on and strengthening existing local structures rather than necessarily creating new policies or frameworks. There is also a strong belief that local youth are best positioned to identify tensions and design culturally relevant solutions.

> *Platforms that genuinely work, such as participatory grantmaking models, decentralized civic tech, and community coalitions, succeed precisely because they shift youth from passive witnesses to active decision-makers.*

Insight: Top-down programmes and policies are often seen as inefficient and out of touch. The rare successes cited often occurred outside state structures, through **community-based initiatives and local dialogues** that bypassed corrupt bureaucracies. One respondent stated that “Youth should have real representation in local peace committees, receive training in dialogue and conflict resolution, and have access to funding for community-led peace initiatives”.

Key Recommendation: Respondents recommended that resources and support be made directly accessible to community-based youth organizations, while strengthening existing national pathways for advancing the YPS agenda.



05
The Double-Edged Sword of Digital Spaces

Technology and social media emerged as both important enablers of peace and participation, and potential amplifiers of tension, polarization, and conflict.

> *Meaningful youth engagement requires more than simply providing access to technology. It also requires trust, digital literacy, inclusion and a safe environment for participation.*

Insight: While digital platforms can be used for organizing and positive messaging, they are also primary vectors for hate speech, misinformation, and propaganda. A respondent from Pakistan commented that youth “face misinformation and political disinformation on social media, including manipulated content, unverified claims, and misleading narratives” adding that “stronger civic and digital literacy” is needed.

Key Recommendation: According to respondents, young people must be equipped to become "digital peacebuilders." This involves training in media literacy, fact-checking, countering hate speech online, and creating positive alternative narratives in local languages.

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