

A Brief Analysis of New UN Security Council Resolution 2535 on Youth, Peace and Security

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Introduction

On 14 July, the UN Security Council adopted its third resolution on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS): [UNSCR 2535 \(2020\)](#). The resolution was co-sponsored by France and the Dominican Republic (DR) – the first time a permanent and non-permanent Member of the Security Council collaborated to co-sponsor a YPS resolution. One of the most significant elements of the Resolution is that it cements the place of YPS on the agenda of the Security Council, by requiring the UN Secretary-General to submit a biennial report to the Council on the implementation of the YPS agenda and associated Resolutions.

UNSCR 2535 introduces new language to reinforce political commitment to the implementation of the YPS agenda. In part, this amounts to affirming the commitments already made in [UNSCR 2250 \(2015\)](#), [UNSCR 2419 \(2018\)](#), and in the Presidential Statement on YPS (S/PRST/2019) adopted in December 2019. But UNSCR 2535 also seeks to operationalize these commitments and so includes new language to expand the vision that the UN and governments should take for the implementation of the YPS agenda, through its emphasis on meaningful inclusion of youth in peace processes, in humanitarian action, as well as its reference to the protection of ‘civic and political spaces’, where the vast majority of young peacebuilders operate.

Assessment and Analysis of the Resolution

YPS policy commitments and contributions

UNSCR 2535 reasserts and tightens the intrinsic relationship between the global YPS agenda and the ‘sustaining peace’ agenda as set out in the twin UNSC and UNGA resolutions ([UNSCR 2282](#) and [A/70/714](#) of 2016). The Resolution explicitly notes the centrality of youth to the sustaining peace agenda through: “*Emphasizing* the importance of a comprehensive approach to peacebuilding and sustaining peace, particularly through the prevention of conflict and addressing its root causes at all stages of conflict.” The Resolution recognizes that YPS agenda and the demographic focus on youth through a peacebuilding lens traverses the UN pillars, bridges the operational siloes across the UN, and offers a powerful – and arguably essential – vehicle to integrate peacebuilding and prevention efforts across all the phases of peace and conflict cycles, not just in post-conflict contexts.

The resolution also consolidates the connections to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda through multiple references and repeated commitment to the distinct experiences and roles of young women – thus

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cementing the un-contestable link between YPS and an age/generationally-responsive WPS agenda. This is most strongly asserted in the preamble:

“Recognizing the challenges faced by youth, especially by young women, which put them at particular risk, including gender inequalities that perpetuate all forms of discrimination and violence and emphasizing that advancing gender equality and empowerment of women is critical for the full, equal and effective participation of women at all stages of peace processes given their vital role in the prevention and resolution of conflict and peacebuilding, reaffirming the key role women can play in re-establishing the fabric of recovering society and in the development and implementation of post-conflict strategies in order to take into account their perspectives and needs...”

UNSCR 2535 also makes specific reference and notes “with appreciation... the United Nations Youth 2030 Strategy of the Secretary General which provides a road map for the United Nations system, including a specific priority on peacebuilding and resilience-building”. This recognition gives particular weight to the Youth 2030 Strategy to drive youth-specific issues within the UN system. In so doing, it also reinforces the importance of investing in the resilience, resourcefulness and inclusion of young people to build peace, rather than in risk-based approaches which project young people as a potential threat, alienates them, closes down their arenas of political participation, and inhibits their engagement in peacebuilding. This language reinforces the approach to “investing in the upside”, which was articulated and promoted in [The Independent Progress Study on YPS: *The Missing Peace* \(A/72/761-S/2018/86\)](#) based on global consultations with young people themselves – also explicitly noted in UNSCR 2535.

Inclusion

In keeping with the core messages of the Independent Progress Study, UNSCR 2535 rests heavily on an assertion of the importance of youth inclusion in ensuring peacebuilding processes and objectives serve all segments of society. The expanded framing of inclusivity in the Resolution (of young women, IDPs, refugees, victims, etc.), is also timely and relevant in light of the current global movement focused on structural and systemic racism. The resolution promotes the notion that

“...inclusivity, including by ensuring full, effective and meaningful participation of youth without discrimination of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, disability, religion or belief, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status, is key to advancing peacebuilding processes and objectives in order to ensure that the needs of all segments of society are taken into account...”

Perhaps of greatest significance, UNSCR 2535 goes further to recognize for the first time “the structural barriers that limit the participation and capacity of young people” once again acknowledging that this particularly impacts young women.

Walking the political tightrope – Counter-terrorism and violent extremism

The YPS agenda has always ‘walked a tightrope’ between Member States with competing views of youth. Some Member States continue to view the YPS agenda as essentially revolving around hard security-oriented Counter-Terrorism and Countering/Preventing Violent Extremism (C/PVE) approaches. Others support it as a strategy for redressing the gaps in inclusion, participation, and trust of a large demographic group worldwide and with the primary intention of addressing the civic trust deficits between young people and their governments. Maintaining political support from Member States across this divide has

continuously been a tricky endeavor. This tension continues to exist in UNSCR 2535, which makes extensive reference to preceding Security Council resolutions on Countering Terrorism (UNSCRs 2178 (2014), 2195 (2014), 2354 (2017), 2395 (2017), 2396 (2017), 2462 (2019) and 2482 (2019)). This has already significantly influenced the funding and investment strategies across the UN system.

These prominent references to countering terrorism or violent extremism, risk reinforcing the very ‘policy panic’ about youth that was highlighted by *The Missing Peace* study. The Study detailed how policy approaches which feed off and feed into stereotypes of youth as a ‘threat to be contained’ or a ‘problem to be solved’, produce un-nuanced and counterproductive ‘hard’ security policy responses, at the expense of investing in meaningful inclusion and resilience for peace which address underlying causes of violence, youth marginalization and exclusion. In this vein, UNSCR 2535 also restores the problematic reference to the threat of youth “radicalization” that had been excised from UNSCR 2419, as well as from the recent Presidential Statement which was adopted following to the open debate organized by South Africa on mobilizing “Youth Silencing the Guns by 2020”. The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, Ms. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, underlines that the lack of a robust scientific basis for the current countering and preventing violent extremism policies and practices, including counter and de-radicalization programs, produce many counterproductive results (A/HRC/43/46). The Special Rapporteur, in her most recent report, underscores that employing the concept of ‘radicalization’ paves the way for “structural discrimination and exclusion, including surveillance and harassment” and harms the civic trust and social cohesion among communities through securitizing the role and responsibilities of “teachers, social workers, medical staff and other health-care professionals, prison staff, neighbours and family members, community leaders and members of faith-based groups” (A/HRC/43/46). In this respect, Resolution 2535 runs the risk of reinforcing the ‘securitization’ of the YPS agenda, despite consciously engaging with international human rights and humanitarian law as safety valve to curtail the counterproductive implications these Counter-Terrorism approaches have for youth inclusion. The Resolution:

“Stresses the importance of providing opportunities for young people to strengthen resilience against radicalization to violence and terrorist recruitment by creating policies for youth, while complying with relevant obligations under international law, in particular international human rights law and international humanitarian law as an essential part of successful counter-terrorism efforts;...”

This theme is further revealed in online digital and social media spaces. Despite acknowledging that these digital platforms both offer alternative creative vehicles for political expression and organization of youth, as well as sources of disinformation and manipulation, the rights-based approach in UNSCR 2535 stands uncomfortably alongside the rationale for ‘hard’ security approaches by governments dealing with the internet, social media and other digital spaces under the guise of the presumed threat and appeal of violent extremism. UNSCR 2535:

“Recognizes that digital spaces provide innovative participation opportunities for dialogue, accountability and transparency in decision-making, including in conflict-affected contexts and that, at the same time, inequalities with regards to access to technology remain widespread and Internet and social media can be used to spread disinformation and terrorist ideologies and threaten and attack young activists and expressing concern over the increased use, in a globalized society, by terrorists and their supporters of new information and communication technologies for terrorist purposes, and encourages Member States to act cooperatively to prevent terrorists from exploiting technology, communications and resources for terrorist acts, while respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms and in compliance with other obligations under international law”

Human rights protections – including civic and political spaces

The Resolution does, however, contain important language from a human rights perspective, including the assertion of a strong relationship between peace and justice and human rights. Paragraph 2 of the resolution thus reaffirms:

“... states’ obligation to respect, promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms of all individuals, including youth, and ensure equal access to justice and preserve the integrity of rule of law institutions; and to foster an enabling and safe environment for youth working on peace and security, including by protecting civic and political space and condemning hate speech and incitement to violence...”

This is a highly significant commitment in its linkage of the protection of human rights and equal access to justice and the preservation of rule of law on one hand, and the connection to an enabling and safe environment for youth, including protection of civic and political space, and the condemnation of hate speech and incitement to violence, on the other. The reference to “protecting civic and political space” is new and arguably precedent setting in bridging the human rights and peace and security pillars of the UN.

UNSCR 2535 also expands the notion of protection, which is one of the five pillars of the UNSCR 2250, through integrating strong human rights-based perspectives in urging Member States:

“...to facilitate an inclusive, safe, enabling and gender-responsive environment in which youth actors, including youth from different backgrounds are recognized and provided with adequate support and protection to implement violence prevention activities and support social cohesion, and to carry out their work independently and without undue interference, including in situations of armed conflict, and to investigate thoroughly and impartially threats, harassment, and violence against them, to ensure that perpetrators be brought to justice...”

This broader notion of protection has important potential implications for the improvement of young peacebuilders’ relationship to policing and law-enforcements institutions. The resolution also goes further to demand accountability and an end to impunity for international crimes and “other egregious crimes” perpetrated against civilians, including youth. This offers important opportunities to advance the role of youth in transitional justice processes – a recommendation proposed in *The Missing Peace* - but which has received little attention in the implementation of YPS agenda to this point.

Education for resilience

The Resolution takes important steps in actively engaging with the role of education in youth resilience and peacebuilding, that had received expansive coverage in *The Missing Peace*, as well as in the UNSG’s first report to the Security Council on YPS (S/2020/167). UNSCR 2535 specifically and importantly recognizes young people’s “access to quality education and economic opportunities”, and the “dramatic impact [of this] on durable peace and reconciliation.” Elsewhere the Resolution also takes particular note of “the insufficient investment in facilitating inclusion, particularly through quality education”, and especially of young women. The Resolution reaffirms:

“...the right to education, and its contribution to the achievement of peace and security and further recognizing that investment in universal, and inclusive education and training is an important policy investment that States can make to ensure the immediate and long-term development of youth, and

reiterating that access to inclusive, equitable and quality formal and non-formal education are important...”

Although the commitment to education for peacebuilding is fairly generic, paragraph 12 of the Resolution specifically seeks to assert the protection of educational institutions from all forms of violence, and to preserve them as points of access for all youth, and particularly for young women, through the right to education.

Paragraph 8 offers something of a ‘catch-all’ recommendation which tends to assume a given relationship of ‘social and economic development and growing local economies, creating jobs, vocational training, education and entrepreneurship, as well as political engagement’ on one hand, to peacebuilding on the other. In addition, it: “stresses the importance of creating policies for youth that would positively contribute to peacebuilding efforts” through all of these means. There is little more than faith in these assumed symbiotic relationships, rather than any specific guard against ‘doing potential harm’, or more proactive or ‘peace-responsive’ design.

Consolidating and expanding the role of youth in peace processes

While the adoption of UNSCR 2419 in 2018 expounded the UN Security Council’s commitment on youth participation in peace processes, this tended to be oriented around formal and mediated peace processes. UNSCR 2535 on the other hand, breaks new some new ground in the specific acknowledgement of the role of youth in “...contributing to justice and reconciliation... lasting peace and economic prosperity if inclusive policies are in place...” It also values the role of youth participation in post-conflict reconstruction, and the promotion of “peace, reconciliation and rehabilitation...”:

The Resolution also introduces new and strong language that consolidates the participation of youth in peace processes, by diversifying and specifying the sub-categories of youth who have a particular stake and role to play:

“...their participation in peace processes can significantly contribute to the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security, and should be an important component of any comprehensive strategy to resolve conflict and build peace...”

The resolution specifically underlines the participation of young women, refugees and internally displaced youth and their importance to the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security, and calls on Member States:

“...to take steps to encourage the meaningful participation of youth in the reconstruction of areas devastated by conflict, to bring help to refugees, internally displaced persons, and war victims and promote peace, reconciliation and rehabilitation;”

This evolving vision of meaningful youth participation in peacebuilding affirms that the value and motivation for this is not just to prevent young people acting as ‘spoilers’, but is essential to rebuild damaged relationships and cultivate the trust indispensable to the durability and legitimacy of peace agreements. This requires an integrated and multi-level approach to ensure young people’s simultaneous participation “in the room” in formal peace processes, but also “around the room” and “outside the room”, as proposed in the policy paper, [We are Here: An Integrated Approach to Youth Inclusive Peace Processes](#), which was commissioned by the Office of the UN Secretary General’s Envoy on Youth and presented to the UNSC at the Open Debate on YPS in July 2019.

‘Peace Responsiveness’ – the YPS agenda, humanitarian action and post-conflict recovery

UNSCR 2535 reinforces the role of young people in humanitarian action and post-conflict recovery, strengthening the connections between the YPS agenda and humanitarian response. The Resolution recognizes that:

“...young people’s meaningful engagement in humanitarian planning and response is essential to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance and that young people play a unique role in strengthening the national, local and community-based capacities in conflict and post-conflict situations to prepare for and respond to increasingly frequent and severe weather events and natural disasters, as well as to public health challenges that affect young people’s life and their future, including the COVID-19 pandemic, and in this regard, encourages member states to support and integrate youth into decision-making processes in these regards”

It is noteworthy that the Resolution refers not only to youth responses and roles in the implementation of humanitarian responses, but to the importance of their involvement in the planning, design, and decision-making processes in this regard. It is also significant that reference is made to natural disasters, ‘weather events’ and public health crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The reference to ‘weather events’ is slightly odd, but noteworthy because this is effectively a substitute for the language of climate change, to which there were objections by some UNSC Member States.

The emphasis on the meaningful participation of youth in post-conflict humanitarian context also include references to “reconstruction... reconciliation and rehabilitation”, affirming the agency of youth and moving beyond only seeing them as beneficiaries of these processes. These references to engagement of young peacebuilders in post-conflict humanitarian contexts powerfully illustrate the transversal potential of the YPS agenda in building bridges between the peace and security, human rights and protection agendas through the vehicle of meaningful youth participation. Beyond just adopting a ‘do no harm’ approach, this offers a powerful illustration of the potential for proactive peace responsive operational approaches seen through the lens of the youth demographic.

As part of its humanitarian focus, the Resolution also specifically promotes “...the physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of young survivors of armed conflict, including those with disabilities, and survivors of sexual violence in conflict...” (paragraph 11), as well as the rehabilitation of young refugees, IDPs and war victims (paragraph 13). Although these references stop short of specifically prioritizing mental health psychosocial support services for young women and men, this language on psychosocial recovery, rehabilitation and re-integration is nonetheless relatively new in Security Council Resolutions on YPS. This hopefully signals the responsiveness of UNSC Member States to the needs expressed by young women and men themselves as expressed in the recommendations of *The Missing Peace*.

Operationalizing the YPS Agenda – from policy to delivery?

UNSCR 2535 introduces a wide range of new measures for operationalizing the YPS agenda and ensuring certain procedural advances or commitments. Of paramount importance in this regard, the resolution requests biennial reporting by the Secretary-General to the Security Council on implementation of UNSCRs 2250, 2419 and 2535. This finally entrenches the YPS mandate on the UNSC agenda as an ongoing concern in a way that should no longer accommodate debate on the place of youth, peace, and security in the Council. This is particularly important as there had been substantial resistance from some P5 Security Council Members on this matter previously. The resolution also requests the UN Secretary-General to:

“...include information and related recommendations on issues of relevance to young people, in the context of armed conflict, including on progress made towards participation of youth in peace processes, in thematic and geographic reports and regular briefings to the Council, as well as to include pertinent disaggregated data related to youth within existing mandates..”

Although UNSCR 2419 had mandated a one-off UNSG’s report, this is now required to be a regular and ongoing commitment. Furthermore, the reference to “thematic and geographic reports... and briefings to the Council” opens the door to expanded engagement of youth actors working at regional, national and local levels in the evaluation and implementation of the YPS agenda. Paragraph 18 also makes the commitment to continue to have civil society - and particularly youth organization and young peacebuilders – regularly brief the UNSC on YPS-related matters. Presumably this may include, where appropriate, on country-specific debates and discussions as well.

In Paragraph 14, UNSCR 2535 also takes a permissive rather than prescriptive approach to national action plans at the country level on YPS implementation by:

“Encourag[ing] Member States, regional and sub-regional organizations to develop and implement policies and programs for youth and to facilitate their constructive engagement, including through dedicated local, national and regional roadmaps on youth, peace and security (emphasis added)...”

The paragraph goes on to stipulate that this must be: “...with sufficient resources, through a participatory process, in particular with young people and youth organizations...” and then also stipulates that implementation must include “...the monitoring, evaluation and coordination with young people...” This is highly significant in the manner it signals the principled importance of participation of youth not only in implementation, but in design, monitoring and evaluation as well.

The resolution also includes references to the implementation of the YPS agenda in UN mission settings by calling on “Member States, regional organizations and the United Nations system, including peacekeeping and special political missions, to coordinate and increase their engagement in the implementation of resolutions 2250 (2015), 2419 (2018), and this resolution, including through inclusive partnership with young people, and to ensure dedicated capacities with regard to youth, peace and security...” This stops short of demanding that this be integrated into planning, budgeting, and designing monitoring and evaluation, but is nonetheless important. However, as a new commitment in this regard, the resolution requests the UNSG to provide guidance for all peacekeeping and ‘other relevant UN Missions’ on the implementation of the YPS agenda and “...urges all peacekeeping and other relevant United Nations missions to develop and implement context-specific strategies on youth, peace and security, bearing in mind their respective mandates...” This explicitly expands the goal of implementing the YPS agenda to peacekeeping settings. In addition, the Resolution builds on the UNSCR 2419 and affirms the commitment of the Peace Building Commission (PBC) and the YPS agenda as part of the PBC’s engagement and participation strategy.

UNSCR 2535 also takes the significant step of stipulating that the Office of the Secretary General’s Envoy on Youth should be responsible for promoting coordination and coherence of youth, peace and security activities across the UN-system, and for tracking implementation of the UNSCR 2250, 2419 and 2535. Paragraph 19, goes further to recognize: “...the role of the Secretary General’s Envoy on Youth and her Office, and the work of relevant entities of the United Nations, Rapporteurs, Special Envoys, Representatives of the Secretary-General, and Resident Coordinators in the implementation of the youth, peace and security agenda”. This specifically increases responsibility of Resident Coordinators for commitment to working on the implementation of YPS agenda at the country level, albeit without detailing

specific operational imperatives or demarcating new dedicated funding commitments. It also importantly promotes a “whole of system” approach to operational integration for cumulative impact in the implementation of the YPS agenda.

UNSCR 2535 also encourages a strong commitment to improve the UN’s youth-specific expertise and capacities, build the YPS agenda into its everyday practice, as well as supporting the active participation of young people in UN business by: engagement with in its own institutional setting by

“*Encourag[ing]* the Secretary General and relevant United Nations Entities, to develop internal mechanisms... to broaden the participation of youth, within the work of the United Nations and *to redouble their efforts* (emphasis added) to improve capacity building and technical guidance and to integrate the youth, peace and security agenda in United Nations strategic and planning documents, conflict analyses, frameworks, initiatives and guidance tools, at the global, regional and national levels, including by *appointing youth focal points* (emphasis added), building on existing human resources, for the implementation of the youth, peace and security agenda within their respective mandates...”

This is significant as a set of objectives to operationalize and implement the YPS agenda and UNSC resolutions and will of course be subject to the political will and capacity of UN entities, agencies, and funds to fulfil this brief. It is noteworthy that this calls for the appointment of dedicated youth focal points, but also that it does this based on existing rather than any new dedicated human or financial resources. In this regard, UNSCR 2535 is slightly ‘toothless’: it repeats the commitments made in the previous YPS resolution (2419), encourages Member States to consider increasing funding (particularly for youth-led and youth focused organizations), but does not make any new commitment to funding targets to support the implementation of the YPS agenda.

Notwithstanding their limitations, these paragraphs at least signal the commitment in principle to operationalizing the YPS agenda and driving it in an integrated fashion across the UN system... ideally as a coherent and coordinated ‘whole of system’ approach. This strongly reflects (whether by accident or by design) the intersectionality of young peoples’ assertion of the structural “violence of exclusion” that was so powerfully articulated through youth voices in *The Missing Peace*. The challenge now will be the resourcing of this ambitious endeavor and the political will and leadership necessary to drive it from political aspiration and policy, to effective implementation and delivery.