

COVID-19 Discussion Paper:

Youth & the COVID-19 Crisis in Conflict-Affected Contexts

The current pandemic is a defining cultural and political moment for today's generation of youth. Many are leading their communities' response to COVID-19. **Indeed, young people are often at the front lines of responses in times of conflict and crisis. From feeding the poor and marginalized to using dance to manage psychosocial stress and trauma, young people are implementing conflict-sensitive and innovative solutions to an unprecedented crisis.** At the same time, many young people are still excluded from civic, economic, and political decision-making processes, despite making up to 70% of the population of conflict-affected areas. The pandemic will likely further reduce young people's access to many basic services and opportunities, such as healthcare, livelihoods, education, and more, compounding the structural and psychological "violence of exclusion"¹ many youth already experience in conflict-affected contexts. Continued exclusion will hinder youth from having a bigger impact in supporting resilience and recovery from the current pandemic; in the worst cases, it may cause some youth to "turn to violent underworlds that offer alternative sources of status, recognition, and social cohesion."² As societies seek to build a new post-pandemic normal, governments face a stark choice: revert to structures that perpetuate the violence of exclusion against youth, or amplify young people's ability to improve trust between people and institutions, help marginalized communities, and prevent violence.

For almost a decade, Search for Common Ground (Search) has co-led the global coalition on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) to increase young people's role as collaborative political and peacebuilding actors. With the support of over 11,000 young people, Search co-led advocacy that led to the landmark UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on YPS (UNSCR 2250) in 2015. In West Africa and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Search has also played a significant role in mobilizing young leaders who helped contain and respond to Ebola virus outbreaks by bridging the trust gap between government and local communities. Drawing from this expertise, this paper highlights the current and potential roles of youth during the pandemic, and provides recommendations on amplifying the positive contributions of youth in mitigating and recovering from the crisis.

COVID-19 Protection and Prevention Needs

Longstanding exclusionary structures limit young people's impact as changemakers. In 2015, less than 2% of all parliamentary seats in the world were held by people under 30, while youth participation in electoral politics was nearly a third lower than the general voting population.³ This exclusion is felt even more acutely among youth of racial, religious, or ethnic minority backgrounds in their countries. Lockdown restrictions to combat COVID-19 may also hinder the ability of young activists from mobilizing peace movements.⁴ In Colombia, Yemen, and Afghanistan, ongoing peace processes are at risk of faltering because of the pandemic, further excluding youth from influencing negotiations and from ensuring peace agreements are long-term and sustainable. An uptick in violence in some conflict contexts also makes youth advocating for humanitarian ceasefires more vulnerable to violence.⁵ Altogether, these dynamics risk eroding young people's hopes for rebuilding their countries.

Structural exclusion makes youth more vulnerable to the pandemic. Up to 77% of working youth worldwide

¹ Graeme Simpson, [The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace, and Security](#). (New York: UNFA and PBSO, 2018).

² Ibid, 32

³ Ibid, 66

⁴ Search for Common Ground, *The COVID-19 Crisis in Conflict-Affected Contexts*. (Washington DC: Search for Common Ground, 2020).

⁵ International Crisis Group, [Global Ceasefire Call Deserves UN Security Council's Full Support](#). (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2020)

hold informal jobs while 126 million are classified as “extreme or moderate working poor.”⁶ As job losses due to the pandemic are expected to hit these populations particularly hard, unequal access to employment and livelihoods opportunities can exacerbate feelings of social and political injustice among young people.⁷ The focus on COVID-19 also means that fewer resources are dedicated to other diseases that affect children and youth in areas where healthcare systems are already devastated by violence. The compounded effects of conflict, lifestyle disruptions, and physical isolation on young people’s mental health can also be damaging, and in some cases may result in unhealthy long-term coping mechanisms involving violent attitudes and behaviors.⁸ Because additional waves of the virus are possible,⁹ the effects of these vulnerabilities may be long lasting, even intergenerational.

The increasing use of information and communications technology (ICT) platforms during lockdown creates openings for false information, exposure to violent extremist messaging, or censorship. Though they are important tools for maintaining social contact and accessing important services such as education, these platforms can also create risks for young people, who are often the most frequent users of ICT. For example, in India, rumors on Twitter that a minority Muslim community was deliberately spreading COVID-19 led to mobs of Hindu men lynching Muslim residents.¹⁰ Violent extremist groups may also use these tools to reach a significantly broader audience, possibly recruiting young people who may need financial and/or social support.¹¹ Last, because many youth movements are likely to increase their use of digital tools, new cybersecurity threats associated with surveillance and censorship can significantly restrict civic space.

Key Opportunities: Youth in Crisis Response and Peacebuilding

Across the world, we are witnessing young people respond to the pandemic in innovative and conflict-sensitive ways. In South Sudan, Search is supporting radio programs like YouthTalk (*Lugara Shabab*) that examine COVID-19 from a youth perspective, including impacts on access to education, friends, and social protection. To make sure that those without access to a radio can listen, programs will be/are being broadcast from speakers mounted on moto-taxis touring strategic locations in the capital, Juba.¹² Amidst a vicious civil war in Mali, Malamine Sare, a high-school student passionate about theater, is combining his passion for media and community-building to produce videos that raise awareness about the virus in his community.¹³ In Afghanistan, Somaya Farooqi and her all-girls robotics team are using spare car parts to design much-needed ventilators.¹⁴

Young people can often operate in spaces where governments or the international community cannot, making them vital partners. Ensuring that official health guidelines are followed and accurate community assessments are conducted is of utmost importance to combatting a disease like COVID-19. Yet, in many cases, communities often do not trust government experts and are often far more trusting of their peer networks.¹⁵ These dynamics were present during the 2014-2016 Ebola crisis in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, where Search was able to

⁶ UN Department on Economic and Social Affairs, [Special issue on COVID-19 and Youth](#), (New York: UN DESA, 2020), 2.

⁷ *Missing Peace*, 78.

⁸ Mercy Corps, [Advancing Adolescent: Evidence of Impact of Psychosocial Support for Syrian Refugee and Jordanian Adolescents](#), (Portland: Mercy Corps, 2016); Dallin van Leuven et al., [Youth and Contentious Politics in Lebanon: Drivers of Marginalization and Radicalization in Tripoli](#), (Washington DC: Search for Common Ground, 2019), 62.

⁹ Sharon Begley, [“Three Potential Futures for COVID-19: Recurring Small Outbreaks, A Monster Wave, or a Persistent Crisis.”](#) *STAT News*, May 1, 2020.

¹⁰ Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Shaikh Azizur Rahman, [“Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories Targeting Muslims Spread in India.”](#) *The Guardian*, April 13, 2020.

¹¹ Marc Sommers, [“Youth, COVID-19 and Violent Extremism.”](#) *LinkedIn*, April 2, 2020. For more analysis on these risks, see Search for Common Ground 2020.

¹² Search for Common Ground and World Vision International, “Policy Brief: COVID-19 and Conflict Sensitivity,” *ReliefWeb*, April 22, 2020.

¹³ Generations for Peace, [“Get Inspired by This Group of Young Peacebuilders from Around the World.”](#) *Generations for Peace*, April 28, 2020.

¹⁴ Tameem Akhgar, [“Ventilator from Old Car Parts? Afghan Girls Pursue Prototype.”](#) *ABCNews*, April 19, 2020.

¹⁵ Edelman, [2016 Edelman Trust Barometer: Global Report](#), (Chicago: Edelman 2017), 21.

integrate ordinary youth as key messengers of public health guidelines to their peer networks. In many cases, the prevalence of false information heightened risks of violence between different groups, as well as attacks on health workers who were often denied entry into communities. Through working with youth, traditional, and women leaders, the dissemination of public health guidelines and accurate assessments of community needs became possible, contributing significantly to containing the Ebola outbreak despite low levels of trust in government.

The post-crisis recovery will benefit tremendously from the contributions of young people. The success of post-pandemic economic and social recovery plans in polarized societies will rely strongly on the kind of cross-group trust that young peacebuilders are already building. Recent research has shown that peace processes that include youth are more likely to endure because of the positive roles that youth often play in (re)building social trust and promoting cross-generational dialogue.¹⁶ For example, by building trust and connections among the youth wings of different armed groups and political parties, a network of Karenni (Kayah) youth organizations in Myanmar improved inter-group relations to the extent that the groups rarely fight now and their state has had significantly reduced armed conflict since 2012.¹⁷

Youth are harnessing the potential of ICT to promote social change. In the Central African Republic, Search collaborates with the Ministry of Information and with online youth influencers to counter hate speech and promote messages of tolerance, thus contributing to peace in communities. Now, with physical distancing orders in place, young people will increasingly turn to digital tools to sustain and grow their roles as bridge-builders, mediators, and peacebuilders. On Earth Day, young activists from around the world ran protests and public-awareness campaigns entirely online while exchanging perspectives on how climate change affected them.¹⁸ Young people have also been pioneering in creating materials to support and engage people with disabilities and those who do not have access to the internet. These technologies thus create new opportunities to connect people for dialogue across dividing lines and to amplify the voices of young changemakers.

International cooperation to support youth-led movements is gaining momentum. Half of youth organizations operate with small budgets below USD5,000,¹⁹ and many are informally organized. This excludes many youth groups from traditional streams of government funding. Globally, Search supported the passing of UNSCR 2250, which was a critical recognition that these exclusionary structures needed to be reformed. In the US, Search supported the introduction of YPS legislation in the House of Representatives, where its successful passage would ensure that US foreign assistance is accessible to youth groups worldwide and that youth groups are meaningful partners in US-led peace and security processes.²⁰ Through the Global Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action, over 50 major international governmental and non-governmental organizations have heeded the advice of youth leaders and recognized the importance of prioritizing young people's needs, rights, and agency in crisis situations. There is an urgent need for more major stakeholders to make similar commitments.

¹⁶ Ali Altiok and Irena Grizelj, [We Are Here: An Integrated Approach to Youth-Inclusive Peace Processes](#), (New York: Office of the Secretary General's Envoy on Youth, 2019), 14.

¹⁷ Mir Mubashir and Irena Grizelj, [The Youth Space of Dialogue and Mediation: An Exploration](#), (Berlin: Berghof Foundation, 2018), 32.

¹⁸ Harry Cheadle, "How Young People Around the World Are Celebrating the Weirdest Earth Day Ever," *VICE*, April 21, 2020.

¹⁹ Rashmi Thapa, [Mapping a Sector: Bridging the Evidence Gap on Youth-Driven Peacebuilding](#), (New York: UNOY Peacebuilders and Search for Common Ground), 7.

²⁰ Rachel Walsh Taza and Kimberly Brody Hart, "Empowering Youth Peacebuilders Will Make U.S. Foreign Policy More Effective," *The Hill*, April 10, 2020.

Recommendations

Responses to COVID-19 in conflict-affected settings should combine emergency measures to support the needs of youth and longer-term structural changes that enable them to make their communities more resilient to future crises. Specifically, we recommend that international and national actors take the following actions:

Recommendation 1 - Prevent further structural exclusion of youth as a result of COVID-19.

COVID-19 may exacerbate the preexisting structural exclusion experienced by youth. Counteracting this will require a concerted effort to promote equitable service provision and protection, including by:

- Protecting the rights and safety of youth activists who may be digitally or physically targeted by state or non-state actors who are using the COVID-19 crisis to restrict civic space;
- Strengthening accountability mechanisms for discriminatory state responses and use of force in lockdown enforcement;
- Prioritizing equitable access to healthcare, including COVID-19 treatment/vaccines and mental healthcare;
- Promoting young people's access to sustainable livelihood opportunities as part of COVID-19 recovery, as well as their participation in developing fair and inclusive labor policies;
- Engaging youth from all backgrounds, bearing in mind different genders, ethnicities, sexual orientations, economic status, disability status, and other intersectional identities.

Recommendation 2 - Partner with young people who are responding to COVID-19 and leading recovery efforts.

Young people must be seen as partners in COVID-19 recovery and response, rather than merely as beneficiaries of interventions. Because the secondary effects of the pandemic in conflict-affected areas are complex, youth leadership and agency need to be supported in partnerships based on trust and equality, such as by:

- Including youth, especially from racial or ethnic minority backgrounds, in designing COVID-19 response and recovery initiatives, such as through local health service advisory boards;
- Highlighting the positive contributions of youth in pandemic response through media and communications, to help shift false perceptions of young people;
- Supporting young people as key messengers of life-saving and accurate public health guidelines;
- Engaging youth in top-level decision-making processes to ensure that COVID-19 does not derail hard-won progress, including in peace processes or security sector and criminal justice reforms;
- Empowering youth-led initiatives to disengage peers from violent groups and narratives, especially digital, and ensure effective social reintegration.

Recommendation 3 - Facilitate collaboration between youth groups and governments to create a stronger prevention and response architecture for future crises.

The current pandemic is revealing the importance of young people in holding communities together and making them resilient against crises, including through serving as essential workers in healthcare. Empowering youth to implement their own initiatives to handle crises will be a key component of creating stronger crisis prevention and response mechanisms. National and international stakeholders can support this effort by:

- Establishing a global, collaborative, and multi-stakeholder, investment mechanism dedicated to funding youth-led disaster relief, peacebuilding, and protection efforts;
- Restructuring bilateral foreign assistance to better support both formal and informal youth groups;
- Institutionalizing policies and frameworks that strengthen youth participation in domestic peace and security affairs, such as through passing YPS National Action Plans.