

DO YOU HEAR THE YOUTH SING?

Across the world, youth have faced marginalization or exclusion by adults, causing young people to frequently feel devalued or ignored. There is a constant hesitancy to include the wider public—including youth and women—in peace processes. The Cypriot youth have also endured, and they continue to face challenges in voicing their opinions during decision-making and peacebuilding processes. This article focuses on UNSC's landmark Resolution 2250 (2015) on Youth, Peace and Security in promoting and maintaining international peace and security with the participation of the world's youth while providing specific examples from the case of the Cypriot youth.

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This year marks the fifth anniversary since the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted the landmark Resolution 2250 (2015) on “Youth, Peace and Security”. The resolution was a milestone in the recognition of youth’s efforts to maintain and promote international peace and security. This is a resolution of paramount importance, as youth represent almost a fifth of the global population. According to the UN World Population Prospects, among the 7.8 billion people alive today, 1.2 billion are between the ages of 15 and 24.¹ This number is expected to reach 1.3 billion by 2030. But what does this figure tell us?

The preface of the most recent report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) opens by saying: “We are living in an age of global mass protests that are historically unprecedented in frequency, scope, and size.”² The report remarks on the underlying causes of these mass protests as a result of several grievances such as unemployment, inequality, corruption, poor governance, economic distress, and political repression,³ all of which were among the leading causes of the youth-led global mobilization last year. From global climate change demonstrations and strikes to protests against ruling elites, corruption, and inequality, the world witnessed mass youth protests in countries such as Algeria, Sudan, Tunisia, Iraq, and Libya. Have you ever considered why these movements are important or why youth participate in these global demonstrations?

These figures demonstrate that youth constitute an important demographic dividend. But youth are not just a demographic dividend; they are agents in society who care about the future and play an active role in shaping it. Historical youth-led movements, such as the South African youth’s leadership in ending its nation’s segregation, have already proven the significant impact youth have on societal developments. Although their efforts have often received scant media coverage⁴ or been suppressed by adults,⁵ youth have continued to take initiative and raise their voice against political, social, and economic exclusion. This is why it is essential that we hear the youth sing.

¹ UN, “World Population Prospects,” 2019, https://population.un.org/wpp/Publications/Files/WPP2019_Highlights.pdf

² Samuel J. Brannen, Christian S. Haig, and Katherine Schmidt, “The Age of Mass Protests: Understanding an Escalating Global Trend,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, March 2020, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fspublic/publication_200303_MassProtests_V2.pdf?uL3KRAKjoHfmcnFENNWTXdUbf0Fk0Qke

³ Brannen, Haig, and Schmidt (2020).

⁴ Chika Unigwe, “It’s Not Just Greta Thunberg: Why Are We Ignoring the Developing World’s Inspiring Activists?” *The Guardian*, 5 October 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/oct/05/greta-thunberg-developing-world-activists>

⁵ For instance, Ugandan youth climate activist Vanessa Nakate was cropped out of a photograph by the Associated Press after a press conference at the 2020 World Economic Forum at Davos. See Kenya Evelyn, “‘Like I Wasn’t There’: Climate Activist Vanessa Nakate on Being Erased from a Movement,” *The Guardian*, 29 January 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/29/vanessa-nakate-interview-climate-activism-cropped-photo-davos>

A Bird's Eye View of the Cyprus Problem and Youth

The lasting separation between Greek and Turkish Cypriots on the small island of Cyprus has long been a contentious issue of the Eastern Mediterranean. It first entered the UNSC's agenda in the 1950s and still continues to occupy the agenda of various UN bodies.⁶ Greek and Turkish Cypriots have lived on an island that has been divided politically for more than 55 years and physically for more than 45 years. Although physical violence has not erupted between the communities for many years, and peacebuilding efforts to reunite the island are ongoing,⁷ the current state of the island is best described as a protracted conflict. The protracted yet "comfortable"⁸ nature of the Cyprus conflict profoundly impacts both Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities, who are inevitably entwined in their daily lives.

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Due to the persistent deadlock, a substantial literature around almost every aspect of the conflict has developed. However, the role of Cypriot youth have been notably absent from this scholarship.⁹ Although Cypriot youth constitute almost 20 percent of the total population and are affected by the dispute in their daily lives at home, at school, and on the street, they are often overlooked in discussions of peacebuilding in Cyprus. In particular, Cypriot youth are marginalized through nationalist history education, intergenerational transmission, nationalist discourse in media and politics, and physically in common spaces. They continue to live between the past legacies and present realities of a divided society. Despite the failure of countless peacebuilding initiatives and critiques of the elite-level, closed-door, “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed” format of negotiations, there is a constant hesi-

⁶ For a detailed account of the Cyprus problem and the intercommunal negotiations between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, see Ahmet Sözen, “A Common Vision for a Way Out of the Cyprus Conundrum,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2017), pp. 27–36.

⁷ The latest UN-facilitated negotiations in July 2017 between Nicos Anastasiades and Mustafa Akıncı, the Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders, respectively, failed in Crans Montana, Switzerland. Most recently, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres brought leaders of both communities together at an informal meeting in Berlin on 25 November 2019. But the parties have yet to agree to the “terms of reference” to begin settlement talks.

⁸ Adamides and Constantinou identify the current state of the conflict as “comfortable” due to the absence of violence in Cyprus and the “high standard of living on both sides of the divide (and especially for Greek Cypriots), the democratic and economically liberal environment, and the EU accession.” Constantinos Adamides and Costas M. Constantinou, “Comfortable Conflict and (Il)liberal Peace in Cyprus,” in Oliver P. Richmond and Audra Mitchell (eds.), *Hybrid Forms of Peace: From Everyday Agency to Post-Liberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 246.

⁹ Ergün Özgür, Nur Köprülü, and Min Reuchmaps, “Drawing Cyprus: Power-Sharing, Identity and Expectations among the next generation in Northern Cyprus,” *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2019), pp. 237–59; Mete Hatay and Giorgos Charalambous, “The Post-Annan Generation: Student Attitudes towards the Cyprus Problem,” *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and PRIO Cyprus Centre*, 2015, <https://www.prio.org/utility/DownloadFile.aspx?id=433&type=publicationfile>

tancy to include the wider public—including youth and women—in the peace process.¹⁰

Youth Matter, but Who Are the Youth?

The term youth has no universally accepted definition, but it revolves around age, social and cultural roles, and psychological factors.¹¹ While the UN defines youth as individuals aged between 15 and 24, this range varies elsewhere. It drops, for instance, to as low as age 12 in Jordan, and rises up to 35 in many countries including Cyprus, South Africa, and Rwanda. As a socially constructed concept, it also relates to the prolonged period of transition from childhood to adulthood, a period which Alcinda Honwana defines as “waithood”. This transition, for many people, is delayed or denied due to their social, economic, or marital status. In this sense, a 40-year-old unemployed or unmarried person can still be considered a “youthman” in Africa.¹²

Besides these definitional challenges, there is an inclination in the literature to cite the negative roles of youth. Academics have questioned the links between “youth bulges” and “violence”. Accordingly, the large number of—predominantly male—youth is deemed a potential source of instability. Jack A. Goldstone, who focuses on the role of youth to explain political violence throughout human history, argues that an excess of youth has been instrumental in many instances of social unrest.¹³ Likewise, Henrik Urdal argues in an empirical study that youth bulges significantly increase the risk of three different forms of internal political violence: domestic armed conflicts, terrorism, and riots/violent demonstrations.¹⁴ While he notes that the level of development and regime type explain this violence more effectively, he reiterates the risk of violence in countries where youth constitute a high proportion of the populace, especially in the Middle East, Africa, and parts of

¹⁰ Alexandros Lordos, “From Secret Diplomacy to Public Diplomacy: How the Annan Plan Referendum Failure Earned the Cypriot Public a Seat at the Negotiating Table,” in Andrekos Varnava and Hubert Faustmann (eds.), *Reunifying Cyprus: The Annan Plan and Beyond* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 163–79; Alexandros Lordos, Erol Kaymak, and Nathalie Tocci, “A People’s Peace in Cyprus: Testing Public Opinion on the Options for a Comprehensive Settlement,” *Centre for European Policy Studies*, 8 April 2009, <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/a-peoples-peace-in-cyprus-testing-public-opinion-on-the-options-for-a-comprehensive-settlement/>; Nicolas Jarraud, Christopher Louise, and Giorgos Filippou, “The Cypriot Civil Society Movement: A Legitimate Player in the Peace Process?” *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (April 2013), pp. 45–59.

¹¹ For a useful summary, see Alpaslan Özerdem and Sukanya Podder, *Youth in Conflict and Peacebuilding: Mobilization, Reintegration and Reconciliation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

¹² Alcinda Honwana, “Youth, Waithood, and Protest Movements in Africa,” *African Arguments*, 12 August 2013, <https://africanarguments.org/2013/08/12/youth-waithood-and-protest-movements-in-africa-by-alcinda-honwana/>

¹³ Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Jack A. Goldstone, “Demography, Environment, and Security,” in Paul F. Diehl and Nils Petter Gleditsch (eds.), *Environmental Conflict* (Boulder: Westview, 2001), pp. 84–108.

¹⁴ Henrik Urdal, “A Clash of Generations? Youth Bulges and Political Violence,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 50, (2006), pp. 607–29.

Asia.¹⁵ Female youth are conventionally portrayed at the opposite end of the spectrum, treating them as victims of violence. These simple male-female stereotypes overlook even the agency of female youth. The reality of the situation, however, is starkly different.¹⁶

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Research focusing on youth potential in post-conflict societies and changing the negative discourse on the role of youth has only begun in the past two decades. As the most recent addition to the international community’s repertoire of conflict resolution, the concept of peacebuilding challenged the previous approaches toward security and peace “by taking people, rather than states, as the referent of security.”¹⁷ Moreover, the “local turn” in peace and conflict studies has raised awareness of the “everyday” and the “agency”, which are often overlooked.¹⁸ Although critical studies have increased the attention toward the agency aspect, scholars only recently began to acknowledge the voices and experiences of youth. This shift in the focus on the perspective and the position of youth as agents in society have accentuated the importance of the potential of youth as agents of change in peacebuilding.¹⁹ Likewise, McEvoy-Levy suggests that “youth are the primary actors in grassroots community development/relations work; they are at the frontlines of peacebuilding.”²⁰

The positive contribution of youth is also reflected in reports from institutions such as UNDP and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), as well as in UNSC Resolutions. All these efforts to divert attention to youth’s ability to positively affect peace and conflict culminated in the adoption of UNSC Resolution 2250 (2015). This resolution sets a framework for action through five key pillars: participation, protection, prevention, partnership and disengagement, and

¹⁵ Urdal (2006), pp. 623–24.

¹⁶ There are studies shows that women have been actively involved in fighting as well. See Susan McKay and Dyan Mazurana, *Where Are the Girls?* (Quebec: Rights & Democracy, 2004), p. 21.

¹⁷ Necla Tschirgi, “Securitization and Peacebuilding,” in Roger Mac Ginty (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 197.

¹⁸ Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver Richmond, “The Local Turn in Peace Building: A Critical Agenda for Peace,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 5 (2013), pp. 763–83; Roger Mac Ginty, “Where Is the Local? Critical Localism and Peacebuilding,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 5 (2015), pp. 840–56; Oliver P. Richmond, “The Problem of Peace: Understanding the ‘Liberal Peace,’” *Conflict, Security & Development*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2006), pp. 291–314; Helen Berents and Siobhan McEvoy-Levy, “Theorising Youth and Everyday Peace(Building),” *Peacebuilding*, Vol.3, No. 2 (2015), pp. 115–25.

¹⁹ Özerdem and Podder (2015), pp. 6–8.

²⁰ Siobhán McEvoy-Levy, “Youth as Social and Political Agents: Issues in Post-Settlement Peace Building,” *Kroc Institute Occasional Paper*, December 2001, <https://www.ciaonet.org/attachments/10915/uploads>

reintegration.²¹ On 6 June 2018, the UNSC reaffirmed its commitment to implement Resolution 2250 by adopting the UNSC Resolution of 2419 (2018), which seeks to include youth representation in conflict prevention and resolution.

Academic research and subsequent UNSC resolutions paved the way to break free from existing boundaries and raise awareness about the role of youth in peace and security. However, the active involvement of youth in the processes of politics, decision-making, and peacebuilding is still rarely welcomed. The two extremes of “infantilizing”, the perception that youth are vulnerable, powerless, and in need of protection, and “demonizing”, which refers to youth as dangerous, violent, apathetic, and as a threat to security, shroud and inhibit youth in peace processes.²² It is difficult to argue that the UNSC resolutions automatically equip the youth with agency. There is still a myriad of challenges ahead for youth in terms of meaningful participation in peacebuilding efforts. The following section will identify some of these challenges with a particular focus on Cyprus.

The Challenges Ahead

While UNSC Resolutions increase the visibility of youth in the realms of peace and conflict, there is still a long way to effectively incorporate youth’s voices, as a resolution necessitates a shift in mindset toward youth, and in general, the political will of countries.²³ Subsequent resolutions will provide a blueprint to include youth in peacebuilding processes, though no resolution applies universally to all cases. The best means of action would therefore be evaluations based on cases such as Cyprus.²⁴ The first pillar’s (participation) first clause reads:

“... increase inclusive representation of youth in decision-making at all levels (...) in institutions and mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflicts”

While youth participate in, or even catalyze, social changes through informal activism and civic engagements, formal political institutions and decision-making bodies often ignore their political agency. Youth political participation remains fee-

²¹ S/RES/2250, “UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015),” 2015, [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2250\(2015\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2250(2015))

²² Özerdem and Podder (2015), p. 7.

²³ Cihan Dizdaroğlu, “Young people are campaigning for change but their voices are too often ignored,” *The Conversation*, 1 April 2020, <https://theconversation.com/young-people-are-campaigning-for-change-but-their-voices-are-too-often-ignored-132893>

²⁴ The interviews cited in this paper are part of a research project entitled “The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: The Cyprus Case,” which received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 796053. All interviews with Greek and Turkish Cypriot youth between the ages of 18 and 35 were conducted between May and November 2019 with the ethical approval received from Coventry University on 8 March 2019.

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ble in most countries. While voting is one of the most formal means of political participation, youth have the lowest turnout compared to all other age groups. Cyprus is certainly not exempt from this trend.²⁵ But low voter turnout is not related to youth’s political apathy. Although young people are generally interested in politics, they trust neither politicians nor existing political parties for change. It is possible to observe this in Cyprus, as it reflects in the expressions of Cypriot youth. For example, a 34-year-old Greek-Cypriot expressed:

Youth don’t believe their votes matter. It doesn’t matter for political parties either I speak or vote. The mentality of Cyprus does not help at all since young people are not included in any type of governmental body, not even in local governments. None of the political parties actually see the need of having young people in their parties.

The same pattern is also valid for North Cyprus. A 21-year-old Turkish Cypriot revealed:

The main obstacle in front of the youth representation in politics is the political structure itself. If I consider the situation in the Turkish Cypriot part, there is still very low youth representation in the parliament. Political parties fail both in responding politics targeted youth as well as in encouraging youth candidates in the elections. They do not have any intention to open the doors to youth.

The political representation of youth in politics is still meager on either side of the island, as there are currently no MPs under the age of 30. Apart from the youth wings of the political parties, youth on both sides have a limited impact on decision-making. While the youth in Greek Cyprus have an advisory body called the Youth Board of Cyprus, no such mechanism exists in the North for the Turkish Cypriot youth. In that regard, I could argue that the Greek Cypriot youth have a more unified body. The Board, which was founded in 1994, comprises delegates

²⁵ Direnç Kanol, “To Vote or Not to Vote? Declining Voter Turnout in the Republic of Cyprus,” *The Cyprus Review*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2013), pp. 59–72.

from youth wings of political parties that are represented in the parliament and works under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Culture. It is important to emphasize that the Youth Board of Cyprus is not inclusive, as it mainly focuses on Greek Cypriot youth, and does not include Turkish Cypriot youth in its strategy, activities, or reports.

Some non-governmental bodies also operate on the south side of the island. One such example is the Cypriot Youth Council, founded in 1996, which provides a space for Turkish Cypriot member organizations. The government of Northern Cyprus only has a Youth Department within the Prime Ministry, which is not tantamount to the body in Southern Cyprus. This is why Turkish Cypriot youth establish their own platforms, such as the most recent Nicosia Youth Association, the Federation of Turkish Cypriot Students in the UK, and the Independent Youth Platform, to deal with the problems of youth and to contribute to their society. These youth-led initiatives in Northern Cyprus are not inclusive either.

Besides the involvement of youth in decision-making at all levels, there is also need to hear their voices in negotiations and peace agreements as the second clause reads:

“... Take into account the participation and views of youth in negotiations and peace agreements (...) by considering needs of youth, supporting youth peace initiatives, and empowering youth in peacebuilding and conflict resolution”

The definitional challenges and negative stereotypes against youth have also prevented the recognition of youth’s agency in decision-making and peacebuilding processes. Stereotypes that associate youth with vulnerability cause the subordination of youth by adults. The general belief that youth lack experience or have political apathy triggers the assumption that adult (male) elites make the decisions or sign the peace accords that will address the needs of societies. But this causes further distrust between political elites and the wider public. Creating a flow of information channels between elites and the public—including youth—rather than pursuing elite-driven peace processes would help in the pursuit of sustainable peace.²⁶

In the case of Cyprus, the UN Secretary General has consistently called upon the Greek and Turkish Cypriot community leaders to engage with women and youth in the peace process. However, both community leaders remain reluctant to include the

²⁶ Margaux Pimond et al., “Breaking the Pattern of Deadlock in the Cyprus Peace Process: Lessons learned from the Security Dialogue Initiative in Cyprus,” *Interpeace*, September 2019, https://www.interpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/PIP_5_Cyprus-web.pdf

wider public.²⁷ This is also reflected in the expressions of Cypriot youth. As a 27-year-old Turkish Cypriot said, “Both civil society and public have limited impact and knowledge about the process, which is a closed-door process mainly between the community leaders.” “Youth are not included in any kind of discussion or not even informed by anyone,” a 31-year-old Greek Cypriot told me. This led to the understanding that the “problem needs to be solved by old senior politicians behind the closed-doors in a serious meeting, where young people have no opinion,” added a 26-year-old Greek Cypriot.

Due to the lack of interaction with local leaders, Cypriot youth have been taking individual and collective initiatives to build bridges between the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities and contribute to peacebuilding attempts. A good example is the most recent initiative, called “LEAD Cyprus”. This initiative was started by two youth-led organizations in Cyprus and seeks to ensure reconciliation through economic dialogue and cooperation. Another example is the youth-led initiative called the “Bicommunal Network of Cypriot Students in the UK”, which seeks to help Greek and Turkish-speaking Cypriots studying in the UK to foster connections with each other off the island. Beyond these recent examples, there are numerous instances of individual or collective initiatives, such as participating in the Cyprus Friendship Program, interacting with other communities, learning each other’s language, and collaborating. All these efforts may have limited impact considering the size of their target groups or participants, but are still important to demonstrate the positive contribution of youth to peacebuilding on the small island of Cyprus.

Finally, it is important to point out that many of these initiatives are supported and driven by outsider third parties, such as the Cyprus Fulbright Commission, UNDP, USAID, and several foreign embassies, due to local hesitancy.

The Way Forward to Hear the Cypriot Youth

There is certainly no panacea that eliminates all the challenges the youth face in being included in decision-making and peacebuilding processes, but I argue that the solution to this problem is to recognize youth agency and pay attention to what they say. The general belief in youth’s lack of experience may be true, to an extent, but this should not eliminate their other qualifications. As youth respect the wisdom of elders, so must they receive mutual understanding from elders. Otherwise, adults’ attitudes toward youth will continue to embody the ignorance and devaluation of youth’s experiences and contributions.

²⁷ Dizdaroğlu (2020); Pimond et al. (2019).

The Cypriot youth have already shown their potential to take initiative in peacebuilding, but no direct mechanism delivers their messages to the community leaders, who for decades have been negotiating for a comprehensive solution. It would be a good start point to establish a Bi-communal Technical Committee on Youth as a confidence-building measure. This will help youth deal with problems on a daily basis by increasing cooperation and trust between the two communities, as the existing youth bodies in Cyprus are not inclusive enough. Establishing such a dedicated committee will be a superb addition to the 12 technical committees that already operate in fields such as cultural heritage, education, gender equality, health, and humanitarian affairs. In Cyprus, the Bi-communal Technical Committees on Education and Gender Equality have already devoted much energy to enhancing the role of women and children in peacebuilding.²⁸ Thus, it is time for youth's priorities and needs to be prized, and their potential to contribute to the peacebuilding process in Cyprus and the successful implementation of UNSC Resolution of 2250 (2015) be realized.

²⁸ Olga Demetriou and Maria Hadjipavlou, "The Impact of Women's Activism on the Peace Negotiations in Cyprus," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2018), pp. 50–65.