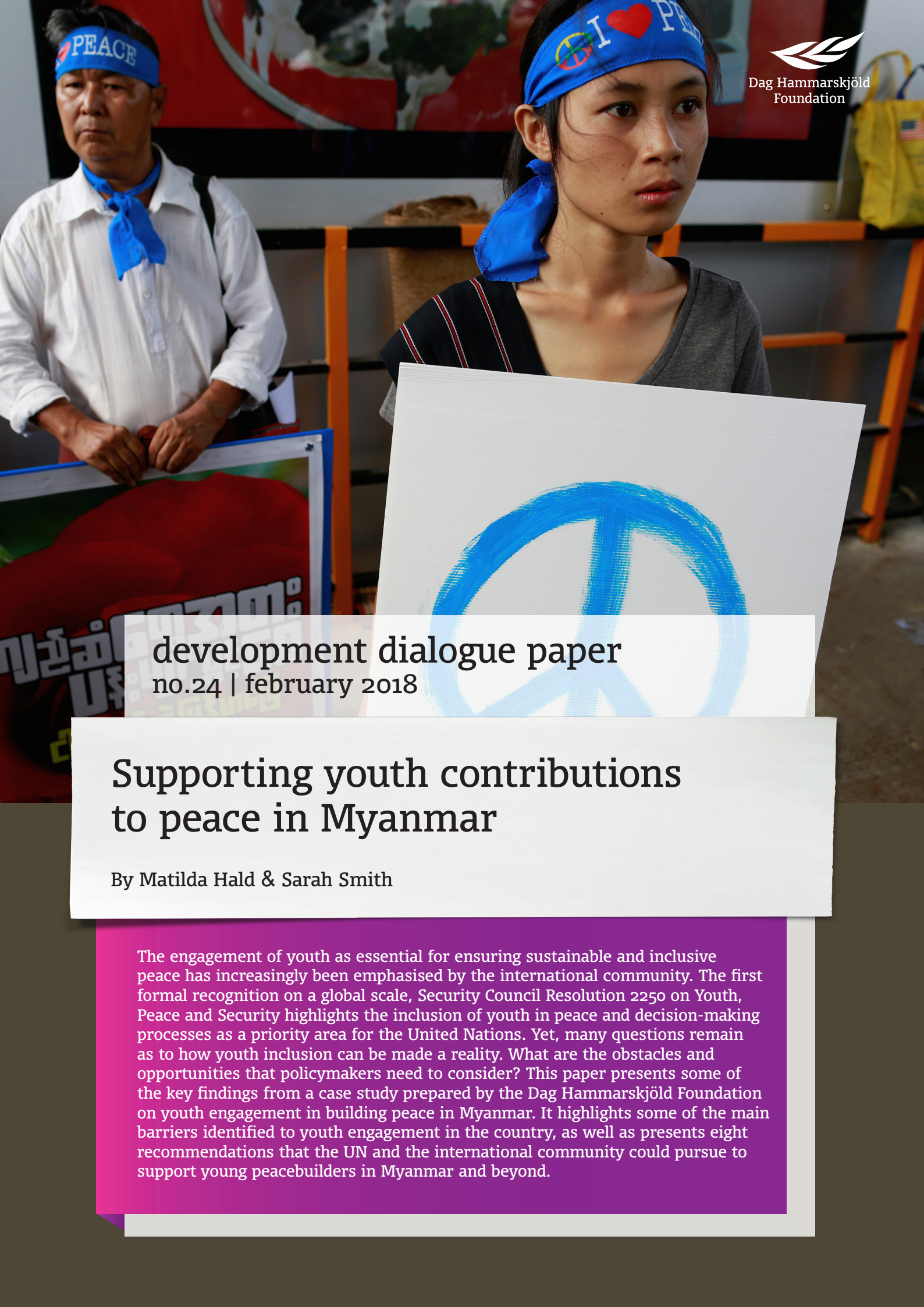




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Supporting youth contributions to peace in Myanmar

By Matilda Hald & Sarah Smith

The engagement of youth as essential for ensuring sustainable and inclusive peace has increasingly been emphasised by the international community. The first formal recognition on a global scale, Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security highlights the inclusion of youth in peace and decision-making processes as a priority area for the United Nations. Yet, many questions remain as to how youth inclusion can be made a reality. What are the obstacles and opportunities that policymakers need to consider? This paper presents some of the key findings from a case study prepared by the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation on youth engagement in building peace in Myanmar. It highlights some of the main barriers identified to youth engagement in the country, as well as presents eight recommendations that the UN and the international community could pursue to support young peacebuilders in Myanmar and beyond.

Introduction

Following more than 50 years of military rule and violent conflict, ethnically diverse Myanmar, also known as Burma¹, has in recent years gone through political changes and initiated an official peace process. A National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) has been signed by the government and about half of the numerous ethnic armed groups, with talks continuing. In 2015, the first reasonably free and fair elections were held since 1990 and the country is now led by a partly civilian government, though its constitution still guarantees political power to the military.

Despite these seemingly positive developments, armed violence continues in parts of the country, most notably in Kachin, Kayah, Shan and Rakhine states. Adding to decades of armed conflicts between the state army and ethnic armed groups, inter-religious tensions and persecution of the Rohingya minority in Rakhine state reached unprecedented levels in the fall of 2017, forcing more than 600 000 Rohingyas to flee to neighbouring Bangladesh.² A peaceful and democratic Myanmar is still far from the reality.

Youth in Myanmar (ages 15–29) make up approximately a quarter of the country's population, with 51.5% under the age of 28 and 55% under the age of 30.³ Throughout the country's history, students and young people have led human rights and democracy movements. Having grown up during a period of change with promises of both political and economic reform, today's young people are innovative and many have a passion for working towards democracy, human rights and peace.

Myanmar youth are increasingly voicing their perspectives on the need for young people to be more involved in peace efforts and to be able to influence decision making. Dozens of youth groups and networks exist throughout the country, involved in activities such as awareness raising, community organising, policy advocacy, inter-faith dialogue, mobilisation through arts projects and peace demonstrations. Given a strong activist culture in the country, young people tend to focus on several social and political issues at a time, continuously picking up new activities. The country also has a strong tradition of volunteerism, tied in part to Buddhist teachings, and young people have in the past few years become more and more engaged in community service in sectors such as health, child care and youth engagement, particularly following Cyclone Nargis in 2008.⁴

Nevertheless, youth in Myanmar face many challenges to participating in peace and development processes at local, regional and national levels. This paper presents some of these challenges, as well as opportunities to strengthen youth engagement. It builds upon a review of relevant resources, including project reports, as well as interviews with representatives from local CSOs, international

NGOs and UN agencies, and two focus group discussions with young activists from various parts of the country and different ethnic backgrounds. In total, 35 people have been consulted, including 15 Myanmar youth.⁵

Challenges

Youth from marginalised groups most vulnerable to exclusion: Like elsewhere, youth in Myanmar do not form a homogenous group. While all youth struggle to make their voices heard, the general structures of exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination in Myanmar society are also reflected among the youth population. The opportunities for a well-educated young Buddhist man of majority Burman ethnicity in the biggest city Yangon differ severely from those of a Christian ethnic Karen woman in a refugee camp. The challenges youth face thus do not only derive from age, but also from factors such as ethnicity, religion, level of education, socio-economic background, gender, sexual orientation and disabilities. With the many and long-lasting violent conflicts and oppression of ethnic minorities in large parts of the country, the situation for youth from conflict-affected ethnic areas, many displaced internally or in refugee camps in bordering countries, need special attention.

Closed space for civil society: Historically the military regime in Myanmar has viewed popular engagement as a threat to its rule, with students in particular perceived as instigating a revolutionary spirit. While the political changes in recent years have opened up some space for civil society to organise and operate, this space remains limited and is seemingly closing again. Restrictions include repressive laws, cumbersome permission processes and monitoring by authorities. Human rights groups experience limitations as to the issues on which they can advocate, and organising by ethnic CSOs is especially monitored due to suspicion of affiliation to non-state armies. In light of this, young people may be less likely to organise due to a general mistrust in authorities or fear of a political and legal system that still does not provide full access to political and civil rights.

Cultural barriers to youth participation: Traditional social values respect the wisdom and experience that comes with age. Youth are often viewed as the beneficiaries and recipients of peace programming rather than individuals who can actively promote peace within their communities. In addition, leadership structures in Myanmar society are generally hierarchical with power being centralised to one or a few individuals. These cultural norms affect youth participation in political processes, the role of youth within civil society at large and the way parents perceive their engagement. Young women face additional cultural barriers due to societal expectations on them to maintain the household and care for children.

Non-inclusive political system (lack of access to institutions and decision making): As few platforms and channels exist for youth to participate in formal political and peace processes, they still face difficulties in making their voices heard among policy makers. Political leaders might involve youth when there is a demand (from international actors or youth themselves) to legitimise their activities, but there does not seem to be a genuine commitment to inclusive dialogue from the side of political leaders. The recent development of a national youth policy was mentioned by some as a positive exception, both in terms of involving youth in the process and the fact that such policy now exists. Youth issues are rarely included in party structures and platforms in any systematic way, including through youth departments. With women making up only 10% of seats in the national parliament in 2016, young women face particular challenges to engaging in political parties, especially via leadership positions.⁶

Socio-economic barriers to engagement: Poverty and unemployment contribute to many youth migrating to urban areas or abroad, where they often face exploitation, insecurity and the absence of a social network or community. Like refugee and internally displaced youth, mentioned above, migrant youth often struggle to find a role in peace and development efforts, being removed from their home communities. Widespread drug trafficking and use by youth in certain areas also severely hamper their engagement. In Myitkyina, in northern Kachin state, community leaders estimated in 2015 that some 65 to 70 percent of the youth population used drugs, including at schools and universities.⁷ Interviewees also suggested that poverty and lack of opportunities have made youth in Rakhine state join violent groups that spread racist views and intensify tensions in the area.

Lack of access to information and knowledge: A general lack of knowledge among youth of how to contribute to and participate in peace efforts is further exacerbated by limited outreach by the government and ethnic leaders regarding peace and development processes. Information is often disseminated in Burmese or English, rather than local languages. However, the rise and spread of social media use has increased access to information drastically, and some interviewees emphasised the inability to critically assess information and the lack of credible information sources as bigger problems than lack of information itself.

Lack of access to education and poor education system: The formal education system is generally considered to be of very poor quality and to not promote critical and independent thinking skills among students that could encourage youth to become active agents for change in society. As a result, many young people in

Myanmar lack capacity or self-confidence to effectively engage with decision makers and push for their viewpoints in policy processes. In some areas of the country young people have very limited access to education institutions. Only about 12 and 16 percent of adolescents (ages 10 to 19) in conflict-affected Rakhine and Kachin/Shan states, respectively, have access to secondary education.⁸ Although ethnic minority language classes are now provided in schools, other subjects are not taught in ethnic languages and textbooks are still printed in Burmese.⁹ This results in unequal education opportunities between Burman and ethnic minority youth as the latter often have poor Burman skills when they start school.

Lack of international support and coordination between different actors: Many international donors, including the UN, only support and work with registered civil society organisations and primarily with larger groups with grants management capacity and English language skills. Consequently, most youth networks that are small and unregistered are excluded. A lack of coordination and information sharing between local youth groups, national and local organisations, and various international initiatives limit the influence of youth voices in national processes. It sometimes also leads to international actors engaging with the same group of young people through similar programming rather than including diverse young people in more tailored initiatives.

Youth initiatives to promote peace and development

Young people in Myanmar have created their own platforms in which to engage on youth issues to promote their perspectives in national policy processes. Since 2012, youth representatives have organised the **Myanmar Youth Forum (MYF)** bi-annually to discuss human rights and democracy, the environment, drugs and peace, as well as the development of a national youth policy. In April 2016, youth organisations such as the **National Youth Congress (NYC)**—created following the first MYF—were invited by the government to give input to the process of developing such a policy. After the third MYF in June 2016, they

held local and regional level youth forums, gathering diverse youth perspectives to feed into this process. The National Youth Policy was adopted in the fall of 2017.

In July 2016, around 800 youth from 26 ethnic groups also developed recommendations regarding the national peace process at the **Ethnic Youth Conference (EYC, @eycmyanmar)** in Panglong. Participants formed the **National Ethnic Youth Alliance** to advocate for a seat at the Union Peace Conference, commonly referred to as the 21st Century Panglong Conference.

UN SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION 2250 (2015)

ON YOUTH, PEACE AND SECURITY

“ Today’s generation of youth is **THE LARGEST** the world has ever known, and... young people often form the majority of the population of **COUNTRIES AFFECTED BY ARMED CONFLICT** ”

“ Disruption of youth’s access to **EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES** has a dramatic impact on durable peace and reconciliation ”



“ Youth should actively be engaged in shaping lasting **PEACE** and contributing to **JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION** ”

“ A large youth population presents **A UNIQUE DEMOGRAPHIC** dividend that can contribute to lasting peace and economic prosperity if **INCLUSIVE POLICIES** are in place ”



Opportunities for strengthening youth engagement

Despite the challenges to youth engagement that exist in Myanmar, there is plenty of will and commitment among youth groups in the country. Key to ensuring that youth in the country are involved in peace and development efforts is understanding that many are already engaged in various activities within their communities. As one youth indicated, young people in Myanmar do not need to be motivated to engage. They need support.

The following identifies suggestions for international peace and development NGOs, bilateral donors and UN agencies on how to strengthen youth engagement in Myanmar. While the recommendations focus on the international community, it is important to recognise that international, national and local efforts to engage young people in Myanmar and elsewhere are not mutually exclusive.

- 1. Mainstreaming support to youth engagement into peace and development programming.** As donors review or develop programmes in Myanmar, a youth lens should be applied. Considerations need to be made regarding how to engage as wide a spectrum of young people as possible, including youth in different age groups and youth who are particularly marginalised due to ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation and socio-economic background. For such programming to be successful, it needs to build on existing local initiatives through long-term engagement and continuous dialogue with young people throughout the country. Lessons learned from implementing other frameworks for inclusion of marginalised groups, in particular the Women, Peace and Security agenda, can also provide valuable input to this work.
- 2. Applying a holistic approach when analysing youth needs.** International actors must recognise the interlinkages between humanitarian and development needs of youth and their possibility to engage in peace and politics. The barriers to participation they face due to conflict and/or socio-economic factors must be mitigated. Efforts related to job opportunities for young people, health services such as addiction recovery programmes and infrastructure projects that help facilitate cooperation and communication, all affect the lives and opportunities of young people and should be considered when tailoring support to youth.
- 3. Reforming funding structures to enable support to smaller youth initiatives, including at the community level.** Donors should develop flexible funding mechanisms and instruments, combined with technical support, to allow for small-scale grants to youth-led grassroots organisations and networks with little management experience while also mitigating high transaction costs. Information on funding opportunities and application forms should be disseminated in local languages, with simpler language that limits the use of technical terms.
- 4. Engage in policy dialogue to ensure space for citizen engagement.** Sustainable youth engagement is not possible without space for CSOs more generally to freely operate. International actors should advocate the government to reform the legal frameworks and bureaucratic procedures that restrict civil society organising. Such advocacy should draw legitimacy from internationally agreed normative frameworks, including human rights norms and standards, and peace and development frameworks such as Agenda 2030.
- 5. Support online and physical youth spaces for dialogue.** As Myanmar youth are increasingly active online, strategic efforts to use social media spaces for sharing experiences and perspectives between young people should be supported. Physical spaces such as youth centres in rural and urban areas are also needed to facilitate face-to-face conversation and dialogue for reconciliation between young people, as well as between youth and other stakeholders, recognising that online, as well as traditional, media platforms cannot be used to reach all youth.
- 6. Promote capacity for critical thinking through education reform and informal training initiatives.** With a long history of media censorship and more recent problems of hate speech and misinformation in social media that exacerbate religious tensions, efforts to promote critical thinking and capacity to filter information are crucial. International actors should support inclusive dialogue for education reform towards an education system that promotes diversity and critical thinking, while also supporting informal capacity building of young people to this end.
- 7. Ensure that young migrants and refugees have a voice in conversations regarding peace and development in Myanmar.** With large numbers of young people being displaced or migrating due to conflict and/or socio-economic challenges, the international community must make efforts to consult youth migrants and refugees. Ensuring education opportunities and recognition of

education received in refugee camps is important to enable reintegration and continued education upon return to Myanmar. International actors should also consider ways to facilitate communication between these groups and those within Myanmar to develop mutual understanding on their respective needs and perspectives.

8. Strengthening cooperation and coordination mechanisms to ensure that efforts have more impact and are not duplicated.

Several interviewees mentioned the importance of coordinating efforts to develop strategies based on the experiences of various international and local-level actors. Better coordination and communication can increase understanding and build trust between local and international actors, while also avoiding gaps and duplication of efforts.

Conclusion

The above findings present a glimpse of some of the key issues related to youth engagement in Myanmar. In reality, these issues are often much more complex and nuanced, and may look very different for young people in different areas of the country. Much more is therefore needed to identify the full range of youth experiences in the country. It is particularly important that young people from the most marginalised sectors of society, whose voices are often under-represented in projects and studies, be brought into conversations. Only in listening to and understanding diverse youth perspectives in Myanmar, and elsewhere, and recognising the ways in which young people are already contributing to greater peace and development in their communities can the inclusion of youth be realised.

Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security

Resolution 2250 calls for a global Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security “on youth’s positive contribution to peace processes and conflict resolution, in order to recommend effective responses at local, national, regional and international levels”. The Progress Study is the result of inclusive efforts involving regional consultations and focus group discussions with young people, youth participation in the Advisory Group of Experts on Youth, Peace and Security and contributions in the form of thematic papers and case studies by members of an inter-agency Steering Committee of NGOs and UN entities. The process of developing the Study demonstrates how a diverse set of actors, including young people themselves, are needed to ensure implementation of SCR 2250 at the policy level and through peace and development efforts on the ground. It is scheduled to be presented to the Security Council in April 2018.

As part of the Steering Committee for the Progress Study and in an effort to support its completion, the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation has been exploring youth participation in development and peacebuilding through contextual analysis of Myanmar and Tunisia. The initiative builds on the Foundation’s ongoing work on inclusivity in building peace. In November 2017, the Foundation also co-organised with the Progress Study Secretariat, led by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO), a validation consultation in New York. The consultation provided space for young peacebuilders who had participated in regional consultations to exchange and reflect and provide feedback on some of the preliminary findings and recommendations for the Progress Study.

For more information on the work, impact and needs of the global community of youth-led organisations, see results of a Global Survey on Youth Peace and Security: <https://www.youth4peace.info/node/254>

For more information about the Progress Study see: <https://www.youth4peace.info/ProgressStudy>

End Notes

¹The military regime changed the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar in 1989. The change of names was long contested and the old name is still used in certain international contexts.

²Most interviews for this paper were conducted between August and December 2016, before the most recent escalation of the conflict in Rakhine State, and the situation of youth in the particular area is not thoroughly addressed.

³2014 Census, available at Economist Intelligence Unit; UNFPA Myanmar, Annual Report 2015

⁴Cuso International, A Study on Urban Volunteerism in Myanmar: Yangon and Mandalay, 2015

⁵While many of the same issues were raised by several informants, the study does not capture all possible perspectives in the country regarding challenges in and opportunities for youth engagement.

⁶Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) data, World Bank Data Database, proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments

⁷Ivan Watson and Tim Schwartz, "Beyond the sectarian fighting lies Myanmar's dark drugs problem," 3 January 2015, CNN

⁸Humanitarian Response Plan Monitoring Report: 2016 Mid-Year Monitoring, OCHA

⁹Ashley South and Marie Lall, Schooling and Conflict: Ethnic education and mother tongue-based teaching in Myanmar, February 2016, USAID and Asia Foundation



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