

WEATHERING RISK

PRACTICAL NOTE

The role of youth in the Climate, Peace and Security agenda

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In many regions, young people are often the largest demographic group facing the interlinked challenges of climate change and conflict. Despite their exposure to climate-related security risks, they are also frequently at the forefront of innovative responses to tackle them – at the community, regional and global level. There is growing recognition of the importance of including youth in Climate, Peace and Security (CPS) policy and programming, but funding and support for youth-led initiatives remain limited.

In response to these challenges, adelphi and the United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC) organised a workshop on the day before the Berlin Climate and Security Conference 2024, “From advocates to experts: An inter-generational exchange on the Climate, Peace and Security agenda.” The workshop aimed to identify concrete solutions and action points to ensure the meaningful engagement of youth in CPS policy and programming at all levels.

Context

Climate change and conflict intersect in ways that profoundly affect young people’s livelihoods, transition to adulthood and futures. The impacts of climate change can exacerbate already existing vulnerabilities, including the lack of livelihood opportunities and exposure to conflict. This, in turn, may spur displacement and increase the risk of [sexual and gender-based violence](#). These dynamics can leave young people vulnerable to [maladaptation](#) practices and exposed to violence – particularly in conflict-affected contexts and areas where access to education and employment, as well as inclusion in local, regional and national decision-making structures, [are limited](#).

However, considering young people only as a “vulnerable group” would mean ignoring their efforts to drive forward the CPS agenda as leaders, experts, advocates and activists. Young people [play crucial roles](#) in building peace at the local level and helping communities grapple with the impacts of climate change. They also increasingly influence high-level political agendas. Examples include upholding [conflict sensitivity](#) in the context of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and [advocating](#) for a more climate-sensitive Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda.

Despite evident synergies between youth, climate action and peacebuilding, significant barriers to a youth-inclusive CPS agenda remain. “Meaningful youth engagement” is often reduced to [tokenism](#) in high-level discussions, and on a broader scale, funding for youth-led CPS initiatives [is still scarce](#). This can be attributed to age-based hierarchies, stigma and a lack of trust from decision-makers. At the same time, many discussions lack nuance. For example, assuming that [young people are a homogeneous group](#) ignores factors such as race, gender, sexuality and socioeconomic status, which significantly influence identities, experiences and realities.

To date, there is no policy framework that effectively links youth and CPS agendas. While the CPS agenda has [advanced significantly](#) in the last decade, it has not yet integrated a consolidated focus on youth inclusion. Furthermore, the UN’s efforts on YPS have [largely omitted](#) climate change. Past discussions at the UNFCCC Conferences of the Parties (COPs) around both [youth inclusion](#) and [CPS](#) have gained traction, but they continue happening in [silos](#). COPs and other fora advancing solutions for CPS issues present critical opportunities to connect these efforts and [continue](#) the [momentum](#) towards an integrated agenda on youth and CPS.

To address these challenges, adelphi and the UNSSC organised an interactive workshop on 7 October 2024, on the sides of the [Berlin Climate and Security Conference 2024](#). The workshop brought together experts, activists, donors and policymakers for an inter-generational discussion that explored how youth

inclusion is already supporting effective climate and peacebuilding interventions. As a follow-up to the [inclusion workshop that took place in 2023](#), this workshop aimed specifically to identify concrete solutions to address climate-related security risks in fragile and conflict-affected contexts through youth-sensitive lenses, building on ongoing efforts to showcase the potential for youth-inclusive CPS programming (e.g. led by [UNDP, FBA and SIPRI](#) and the [UN-Peacebuilding Fund](#)). This practical note captures key takeaways from the discussions.

“ Meaningful youth inclusion means including youth from the get-go. ”

Workshop participant

Key takeaways

1. Barriers to meaningful youth engagement in CPS

Youth engagement in the CPS agenda has faced significant challenges and has been notably lagging behind for several reasons, including:

- **Lack of adequate and sustainable financial streams:** One of the most significant barriers to effective youth engagement in CPS is the lack of access to adequate and sustainable financing. This issue encompasses several critical aspects. Sustained core funding, which is essential to ensure that youth-led climate and peace-focused organisations can maintain their operations and continue their work over the long term, is often insufficient. The uncertainty around core funding means that many youth groups need to budget and plan in a risk-averse manner, possibly preventing them from taking the necessary steps for organisational growth or innovation. This could also force young people to organise themselves within non-institutionalised movements, which impacts their ability to comply with donor requirements and renders the funding process even more complicated. At the same time, in cases where young people explicitly decide to organise in movements – as this may be the most appropriate form of action in certain contexts – donor funding requirements might force them into more permanent structures, ultimately undermining their grassroots efforts (e.g. [NGO-isation](#)). The projectisation of funding often means that youth-led organisations compete against each other for funding opportunities, rather than join efforts and collaborate to address common issues. The funding that they are able to access is also often small-scale, as large grants come with complex applications and numerous restrictions that make compliance difficult.
- **Physical risks and violence against young climate and peace activists:** While young activists are at the forefront of advocacy and climate and peace action, they frequently lack adequate protection and support. This puts them at significant risk of harassment, intimidation and even violence. For instance, in 2020, Global Witness documented an average of up to [4 killings](#) of environmental defenders every week – [many of whom](#) were young people. Within this wider context of increasing violence against environmental defenders, young climate activists and peace advocates are facing a double burden. On the one hand, their efforts to address climate, peace and security are oftentimes not recognised by national or multilateral decision-makers. On the other hand, they are often targeted, harassed and killed. Fundamentally, many of these risks – and young people’s exposure to them – are tied to deeper, systemic issues around the lack of recognition, stigma and inadequate institutional support that need to be considered and addressed when promoting youth engagement.

- **Lack of trust:** While young people are often invited to participate in discussions around CPS issues, their contributions are not always valued equally as those from more senior counterparts. Youth-led organisations often have deep insights into local dynamics regarding the impacts of climate change on security, and they can offer creative approaches to climate adaptation and peacebuilding. However, without genuine collaboration with established institutions, their potential remains untapped. Among the reasons behind this is the lack of trust towards youth activists, which stems from the stigma that younger professionals lack adequate experience and knowledge. At the same time, this translates into young people losing trust in institutions, because their specific needs and priorities are continuously dismissed and/or unaccounted for. The lack of a proper framework that integrates youth, climate, peace and security issues further hinders effective youth participation in multilateral processes. For instance, one key lesson from the [consultations that adelphi, UNEP and UNDP](#) conducted in cooperation with the Haitian Ministry of Environment, was the need to have dedicated spaces where young people can voice their perspectives on CPS and its socioeconomic consequences. This is needed to ensure researchers, practitioners and policymakers do not avoid missing out on critical perspectives.

“ While it is true that a 25-year-old does not possess the expertise of a 60-year-old, a 60-year-old also does not have the experience of [living in the midst of a climate crisis as] a 25-year-old. ”

Workshop participant



- **Intergenerational injustices:** The ways in which young people experience climate change and conflict are often fundamentally different from those of the older generations. Younger generations tend to feel that they are confronting an uncertain future, with their livelihoods at risk due to the climate and environmental decisions made by previous generations. This situation is frequently referred to as [intergenerational injustice](#). As a consequence, young people often tend to focus on future-looking, long-term solutions to climate and conflict challenges. They are also more open to challenge the status quo by addressing politically-sensitive measures like corruption, resource extraction, militaries' carbon footprint and debt burdens that hinder adaptation. These issues may not directly align with the interests of donors or established government institutions, creating normative barriers that obstruct open discussion and action. For example, [the 2023 official youth constituency of the UNFCCC](#) featured strong language against militarisation and extractive practices, which was lacking from the negotiated outcome document.
- **Language and representation barriers:** Language and representation barriers are hindering the effective participation of young people in CPS issues. Multilateral discussions on CPS are often conducted exclusively in English, posing a significant obstacle for local and indigenous youth-led organisations. Calls for proposals and tenders are also often required to be filled out in English, making it difficult for these organisations to apply for participation or funding opportunities. Ultimately, the perspectives of many young people - including those young people that do not have immediate access to decision-making but also are not part of marginalised or impacted communities - end up being excluded.
- **Literacy gaps in CPS issues:** Disparities in access to and quality of education can significantly impact youth engagement in CPS issues. Access to information and political literacy – including access to and understanding of information about political systems and dynamics – largely depend on the stability of political systems. In countries with political instability and conflict, it is more difficult for young people to access high-quality education and to actively participate in discussions around CPS issues. Young people in marginalised contexts also have fewer opportunities to engage in advocacy. Additionally, indigenous knowledge systems are often undervalued or unaddressed in mainstream education. Even when included, they may be used superficially, without proper integration into the broader curricula.

2. Emerging good practices for youth inclusion in CPS programming and policy

- **Recognising young people as experts and leaders in CPS:** Recognising young people's expertise, capacities and insights can help address the impacts of climate change and conflict, as well as advance the CPS agenda. For example, after the devastating [Storm Daniel](#) hit Libya in 2023, young people were key in mobilising emergency aid. They were also faster to recognise the [roots of the catastrophe](#) within climate change and maladaptation practices that had taken place during the ongoing conflict. This illustrates how young people's knowledge, understanding and perspectives can help policymakers not miss vital information needed to design programming that can prevent (or prepare people for) future climate-related natural hazards.
- **Providing quality funding for local youth-led CPS initiatives in fragile contexts:** There have also been attempts at overcoming the financial barriers that youth-led movements and grassroots organisations working on CPS often face. For example, the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) launched calls for proposals in multiple languages, including local ones and offered step-by-step guidance in the proposal phase. They also focused on flexible and small grants. This helped make the process to award and disburse funding easier and more accessible to youth-led

organisations – an important first step. Similarly, a Sudanese climate leader recently launched a [mechanism](#) that aims to unlock financial support for youth-led organisations and movements that work on CPS. The mechanism helps connect organisations that struggle to absorb donor contributions and reporting with more established youth organisations from other contexts.

“ To be better funders, we need to be better listeners and change the system in a way that ensures that financial resources reach youth-led initiatives directly within communities. ”

Workshop participant

- **Gathering disaggregated data on young people’s views, concerns and needs:** Other initiatives have attempted to address the challenge of meaningfully including young people’s perceptions and knowledge into the planning and implementation of CPS projects. For example, Oxfam and International Alert’s climate-fragility assessments in Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger, Ethiopia and Somalia were based on consultation processes that explicitly collected and incorporated young people’s views and perceptions.¹ This approach allowed researchers to gather nuanced insights into youth perspectives. For example, the assessment in Ethiopia’s Jarar zone clarified young people’s involvement in and motivation for charcoal production – a practice often criticised by elders – and shed light on the economic needs and environmental challenges behind that practice. Other experiences in Albania and Afghanistan highlighted the importance of dedicated consultations with young women, and also with young people in rural settings, to understand each group’s needs during conceptualisation.
- **Opening pathways for young experts into decision-making spaces:** There are also emerging efforts to fund, support and open up pathways for young people to bring CPS expertise into more influential decision-making roles at national and international levels. One example is the annual [UNDP Climate, Peace and Security Academy](#), which, for the first time in 2024, exclusively targeted young experts and leaders, reaching out to a total of 45 delegates from over 20 countries. Similarly, the Aswan Forum’s Youth Component enabled young experts to bring in their specific CPS expertise and [call](#) for more action to “advance youth-led holistic perspectives on the implications of climate change on peace, stability and development.”

3. Next steps towards a youth-focused CPS agenda

To ensure meaningful youth engagement, the narrative surrounding youth must be transformed. Drawing on the lived experiences and expertise of young people, particularly those on the front lines of climate change and conflict, it becomes apparent that young people are not merely victims in vulnerable situations. Rather, they are active agents of change and innovation. They bring fresh perspectives and solutions to the international community, driving progress and fostering resilience in the face of eminent challenges. This section offers recommendations for the UN system, member states, donors and CPS researchers and practitioners to work towards this goal, while also pointing out steps to strengthen and institutionalise youth-led contributions in the CPS agenda.

1 The publication of findings is planned for 2025.

FOR THE UN SYSTEM AND MEMBER STATES

- **Institutionalise and fund youth leadership in CPS**

The UN system and its member states should ensure that the specific priorities of young people and their stated role in CPS are integrated within mandates, pacts and resolutions at the regional and international levels. Additionally, building on [UNSCR 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security](#) and related resolutions, it is high time to build a policy framework for Youth, Climate, Peace and Security that integrates climate priorities into the YPS agenda.

The UN system and its member states must make sure that declarations and pacts around peace-positive climate finance, loss and damage, as well as the New Collective Quantified Goal, include youth-led climate action at their core – to ensure that funding actually becomes available to those (often youth-led) initiatives that are already tackling climate change and building peace on the ground. This could be done by dedicating financing mechanisms to youth-led efforts that include core funding as well as seed and risk funding for unregistered movements and organisations, such as young refugee-led organisations.

The UN and its member states should also ensure that young people are not excluded from relevant conferences, meetings and fora due to administrative or visa-related processes. Specifically, young people coming from fragile and conflict-affected areas face the burden of these bureaucratic procedures in order to secure a seat at the table. Thus, host countries should ensure that these processes are simplified and facilitated to enable meaningful youth participation and engagement.

- **Strengthen protection mechanisms for youth activists**

The UN system and its member states must recognise and mitigate the security risks young climate and peace activists face, particularly in high-risk areas. This could happen through peacebuilding and/or climate funding for protection measures, or by enhancing the possibility of international exchanges for those young activists who temporarily need to leave their countries.

The UN and its member states should implement stronger legal frameworks, provide international support and advance community-based protection mechanisms to ensure the safety and amplify the voices of young environmental defenders. Their protection needs should be addressed through an intersectional lens, tailoring them to their specific contexts and reasons for which young activists are being targeted. They should also account for diverse ages, gender, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The UN – for example through the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights – and its member states should also strengthen existing protection mechanisms for environmental defenders, ensuring that all relevant stakeholders are accountable for their actions against activists and defenders. They should also work towards actively and consciously creating safe spaces where young people can voice their concerns without fear of retribution.

FOR BILATERAL AND MULTILATERAL DONORS

- **Increase opportunities for capacity-building, learning exchanges and partnerships**

Donors should enhance sustainable and flexible funding for youth-led CPS initiatives. They could support movements and initiatives through flexible core funding alongside project-based and seed funding.

Donors should ensure that CPS projects and programmes include a reciprocal capacity-building component. Continuous support and accompaniment are important to support young people's

CPS efforts. There is also a need to build capacities for institutions and CPS practitioners, in order for them to better understand and incorporate young people's perspectives.

FOR RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS

- **Support youth-led knowledge generation on CPS**

Researchers and practitioners should support the generation of scientific research and knowledge on CPS from young people living and working in fragile and conflict-affected areas, to ensure that their understanding and expertise inform the design of future initiatives. For example, it is crucial that findings from youth-only consultations inform programme design and conceptualisation early in the process. Analysis should also be informed by these processes for better decision-making and policy outcomes that capture young people's unique perspectives. Similarly, scholarships, learning opportunities, research collaborations and fellowships for young people focused on CPS issues should be encouraged and supported.

Researchers and practitioners should also promote South-South and triangular cooperation to bridge the divide between educational systems worldwide. Educational systems should also address CPS and feature indigenous and local knowledge systems as an integral part of sustainability and development education. This could be done by incorporating indigenous and local knowledge systems within epistemic and methodological structures and curricula in schools, as well as by providing climate, peace and security education to young people, so that they can better participate in peace processes.

Different stakeholders involved in supporting or implementing youth-led CPS initiatives should continue to identify and disseminate good practices on funding and programming modalities collaboratively. This information should inform future project design and strengthen youth inclusion in key policy frameworks and processes, in order to help turn incremental momentum into concrete support for youth-led initiatives that combine climate action and peacebuilding.

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