



HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT



Protecting Civic Space, Enabling Peace: Youth at the Frontlines of SDG16+ Implementation

Date: July 22, 2025 | **Location:** UNHQ, NY | **Organizers:** Major Group for Children and Youth (MGCY) Global Youth Caucus on SDG16, IAYSP, TAP Network, UNDP, UNFPA, Blue Tree Foundation, Youth Ambassador Fellowship, West Health Solution Youth Group, United Nations Association of USA - Bronx Chapter, and United Network of Young Peacebuilders.

This High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) side event brought together youth leaders, civil society actors, and institutional partners to spotlight the central role of youth in advancing SDG16+—particularly in the face of shrinking civic space, funding crises, and rising global instability. The conversation will directly input to the United Nations Secretary-General's Second Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS), as requested in Action 20(c) of the 2024 Pact for the Future.

Context

The YPS agenda was formally launched in 2015 through the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2250, which recognized for the first time the positive role of young people in sustaining peace and preventing conflict. It called on Member States and the UN system to include youth in decision-making, protect their rights, support their initiatives, and ensure their meaningful participation in peace processes. Since then, the agenda has grown through additional resolutions and a growing body of research and implementation tools.

Now, as the world marks the 10th anniversary of Resolution 2250 and reaches the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda, young people are doing more than ever to organize, advocate, and lead peacebuilding efforts—from grassroots mobilization to international diplomacy. Yet their work remains underrecognized and increasingly threatened by repression, surveillance, violence, and digital attacks. Many youth-led groups face legal, financial, and institutional barriers that stifle their ongoing work to contribute to peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.

This context framed the objectives of the event: to highlight the lived realities of youth peacebuilders, assess the evolving threats to civic space, and generate actionable recommendations that will inform the upcoming global



review of YPS implementation through the Second Progress Study.

Key Recommendations

From civil society to UN agencies, speakers made the following overarching recommendations:

Protect Youth Peacebuilders: Develop a General Assembly resolution committing Member States to protect youth under threat; create emergency mechanisms for youth at risk of violence or persecution.

Finance Youth Inclusion: Ensure flexible, long-term funding for youth-led organizations; address systemic barriers to youth accessing grants and institutional partnerships.

Institutionalize Youth in Policy: Encourage more Member States to adopt National Action Plans on YPS; make youth part of program design, not just beneficiaries or afterthoughts.

Defend Digital Civic Space: Strengthen digital citizenship education; partner with tech firms to counter cyberbullying, surveillance, and disinformation.

Support Marginalized Voices: Include displaced youth, young women, and youth from conflict zones in policymaking; recognize their lived experience as a form of expertise.

Event

Moderator John Koester, Global Focal Point for the Global Youth Caucus on SDG16 (MGCY) and UN Relations Director at IAYSP, framed the session around a key message: youth are not future leaders—they are already leading. Civic space is shrinking, he noted, and yet youth are persistently defending human rights, building bridges, and holding institutions accountable. He emphasized the importance of this side event in feeding directly into the next global review of YPS implementation.

Panel 1: Civil Society Perspectives

Samiullah Fatih (Afghanistan Youth Network for Peace)

Fatih gave a powerful opening testimony of surviving the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and launching a youth network in exile. Despite a population where over two-thirds are under 25, Afghan youth are excluded from peace processes, education, and policy. He described digital organizing, leadership training, and creating a virtual home for youth through his network.

“Behind the repression, there is resistance. Afghan youth are not waiting to be included—they are already leading when no one is watching.”

He called for international recognition, access, and partnerships that treat Afghan youth as stakeholders—not victims.

Osman Hassoun (IAYSP Lebanon)

As a Syrian refugee in Lebanon, Osman recounted his journey from child laborer to youth peacebuilder. Through IAYSP's "Peace Designer" program, he trained youth to identify social problems and develop community-based solutions. He spoke of breaking barriers between Lebanese and Syrian youth through empathy exercises like the "feeling wheel" and the use of problem-solving tools such as the fishbone diagram.

"One of the biggest threats youth face in restricted civic spaces is believing their voice doesn't matter. But we saw young people turn fear into collaboration and build real projects together."

He urged governments and donors to act as bridges—removing access barriers, lowering financial costs, and providing mentorship.



Chanjun Park (Blue Tree Foundation, South Korea)

Speaking virtually, Park addressed Korea's high youth suicide rate—driven in part by cyberbullying. He emphasized the urgent need to protect civic space in the digital world, advocating for public-private partnerships with platforms like Kakao and Samsung. Blue Tree Foundation's digital citizenship programs aim to equip youth with tools to navigate harmful online environments.

"Cyberbullying is transnational. Solving it requires solidarity between governments, corporations, youth, and international institutions."

Park called on the UN and global tech firms to ensure youth safety online and support digital peacebuilding efforts.

Nico Pampier (UN Association of South Africa)

Nico reflected on South Africa's historical and current struggles, tracing youth activism from the 1976 Soweto Uprising to modern movements like #FeesMustFall. Today, Nico warned, economic exclusion—paired with restricted civic freedoms—creates fertile ground for violence, extremism, and hopelessness.

"Youth are the architects of peace—but they can only build what they are empowered to design."

Her recommendations included a UN General Assembly resolution to protect youth peacebuilders under threat and a global financing mechanism for youth-led peace initiatives.

Isaiah Guzmán Arancibia (Youth Activist, Chile, age 14)

At just 14, Isaiah delivered one of the most impassioned speeches of the event. He spoke of how drug trafficking and addiction are tearing communities apart in Chile and Latin America. He warned that traffickers are recruiting children through social media and video games—stealing lives, dreams, and futures.

“They don’t offer freedom—they offer pain. Every dose sold is one less student in school, one broken home, one dream destroyed.”

But Isaiah’s message was also one of hope. He called for government action to dismantle drug networks—and more importantly, for investments in sports, culture, education, and job opportunities to offer youth real alternatives.

“We must give young people a future worth choosing—through arts, athletics, and hope. Youth are not the problem. We are the solution.”

Elena Marmo (TAP Network)

Representing the TAP Network, Elena highlighted global civil society concerns: shrinking civic space, surveillance, anti-rights narratives, and disinformation. She emphasized how youth-led organizations face disproportionate barriers, including limited funding access and lack of institutional recognition.

“Youth inclusion must not be symbolic. It must be structural, resourced, and protected.”

She called for unrestricted, long-term funding for youth groups, stronger intergenerational coalitions, and storytelling as a tool to challenge harmful narratives and showcase youth contributions.

Panel 2: Institutional Perspectives

João Scarpelini (UNFPA)

Scarpelini traced the evolution of the YPS agenda since 2015, noting that UNFPA integrates youth peacebuilding into over 50 country programs. He stressed the need for:

- Tracking how much funding reaches youth-led organizations;
- Supporting the localization of YPS through National Action Plans;
- Amplifying youth narratives to counter ageist and exclusionary assumptions.

“UNSCR 2250 changed how the UN sees youth—not as risks, but as partners in peace. Now we must deliver on that promise.”

Giulia Tariello (EU Youth Delegate)

Giulia outlined the EU's Youth Action Plan for external engagement and described mechanisms like the EU Youth Dialogue with the High Representative. She emphasized the importance of monitoring and evaluating implementation—not just talking about inclusion.

“We need not just commitments—but accountability. National action plans are essential to turning words into action.”

Kiri Ginnerup (UNDP)

Ginnerup pointed to new UNDP data showing that over 70% of the world's population lives under restricted civic space. She highlighted examples from Ukraine, Colombia, and the Philippines where youth are advancing peace through community resilience, digital innovation, and localized participation platforms.

“Participation without protection is impossible. Youth need safe spaces, clear protocols, and structural inclusion.”

Audience Reflections and Key Questions

During the interactive segment of the side event, youth participants—joining both in person and online—raised seven thoughtful questions that highlighted the urgency and emotional complexity of civic engagement in fragile settings. Their concerns reflected key themes discussed by panelists, including trust, inclusion, sustainability, and resilience.

A central issue was the challenge of trust-building between youth and institutions. One participant asked how youth-led organizations can form genuine partnerships with governments that have historically excluded them or treated them as security threats—emphasizing the need to move beyond tokenism toward shared decision-making and accountability. Another raised the issue of funding, questioning how youth-led groups, often operating without formal legal recognition, can access long-term, flexible support. This aligned with panelists' calls for more accessible and unrestricted funding streams.

Youth also addressed intersectionality and protection. One asked how the YPS agenda can better support those facing multiple forms of marginalization, such as race, gender identity, refugee status, or sexual orientation. Another raised concerns about protecting youth from digital threats while safeguarding civic space and free expression.

Other questions focused on sustaining engagement for youth in exile or diaspora—such as those from Afghanistan or Syria—and ensuring they remain connected to peacebuilding efforts through transnational networks and resources. Collectively, these questions underscored young people's commitment to peacebuilding and their call for meaningful inclusion, sustained support, and real accountability.

Conclusion

This side event served as a powerful reminder that youth are already on the frontlines of peacebuilding—not just in theory, but in practice. From refugee camps and post-conflict zones to digital spaces, classrooms, and policy roundtables, young people are confronting injustice, building civic trust, and advancing the values of SDG16+ every day. They are not waiting for permission or perfect conditions; they are leading amidst crisis, conflict, and constraint.

The testimonies and questions shared during this session—many of them personal, vulnerable, and courageous—revealed both the extraordinary resilience of youth and the urgent need for systems that do more than celebrate their potential. Youth are facing shrinking civic space, online and offline violence, disinformation, legal and financial barriers, and deep-rooted exclusion. Yet in the face of these obstacles, they continue to act—as mediators, educators, organizers, and changemakers.

The insights raised at this event must not remain in the room. They represent a collective mandate for action—a clear call to institutions, donors, and UN bodies to listen, invest, and respond. As the UN prepares its Second Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security, the lived experiences, recommendations, and reflections shared here should inform not only the study's findings but also the global policy shifts that follow. Youth doesn't need to be empowered someday. They need to be protected, funded, and included now—because they are not just the future of peace. They are its present.

