



Extremely
TOGETHER

A Kofi Annan Foundation Initiative

Why youth leadership when dealing with complex crises must no longer be ignored

A position paper by
Extremely Together



Autumn 2020



Deeply concerned at how extremists worldwide were exploiting the uncertainty and fear created by the covid-19 pandemic to reinforce their rhetoric and enrol new recruits, the ten young leaders of the Kofi Annan Foundation's [Extremely Together](#) (ET) initiative decided to increase their online presence. They wanted to provide a platform for young people to share their concerns and develop solutions to be presented to policy-makers. **This position paper distils the main recommendations put forth by the young people consulted.**¹ It calls for multilateral organisations, member states, civil society actors and young people to take a number of **concrete actions aimed at reinforcing youth leadership in the peace and security agenda**, thus strengthening the effectiveness of global and national responses to current and future crises.

Why now?

The pandemic has exposed a stark **discrepancy between the leadership demonstrated by young people in dealing with the tensions created by the crisis and their limited inclusion in the peace and security agenda**. Significant normative progress has been made in recognising the importance of youth engagement in building peace, as shown by the adoption of the milestone Youth, Peace and Security Resolution by the UN Security Council (UNSCR 2250) in 2015, the subsequent call by 'The Missing Peace' progress study to address the "violence of exclusion" affecting young people, the recommendations put forth by UN Security Council Resolutions 2419 and 2535 to ensure young women's and men's involvement in the peace agenda, as well as the UN Youth 2030 Strategy. However, little has happened in practice. Young people continue to encounter structural barriers and societal limitations to meaningful participation in peace and security efforts, and more widely in political, economic and community life.² This year's fifth anniversary of UNSCR 2250 is a unique opportunity for governments, multilateral organisations, civil society actors and young people to **accelerate the necessary shift from seeing youth as 'not ready for the job' to mainstreaming intergenerational co-leadership**.

What has the covid-19 pandemic taught us about youth leadership?

The pandemic is putting an **extraordinary burden on young people** worldwide: their education has been put on hold; they are paying the brunt of the virus economic effects, including massive layoffs, and their livelihoods have become unstable. Youth who make the most of informal economy workers are also directly affected by the brutal enforcement of lockdown by security forces on street vendors in some countries. In some settings, covid-19 has also triggered anti-democratic restrictions and violent repression of vibrant youth-driven social movements and opposition groups. The crisis has exposed the inequalities affecting minority groups and has aggravated the marginalisation of young people.³

Extremist groups have seized the opportunity to increase their online propaganda and fill the void left by governments' poor response to covid-19. Violent extremists provide simple answers to people's existential questions, blaming migrants, ethnic or religious minorities for the spread of the virus, describing it as a "divine punishment" or disseminating conspiracy theories. With confinement measures and the suspension of education and recreational activities, youth are particularly exposed to disinformation and extremists' recruitment on social media.

Young people see this crisis of the system as an entry point for deep, long-term transformation to which everyone can contribute. Youth response to covid-19, as well as the recent protests against racism and police violence, show that young people are determined to lead collective action to address collective challenges.⁴ Despite movement restrictions and state repression, youth activists have adapted and taken the lead to drive change. We have heard amazing stories of how **young people across the world have been addressing the tensions and polarization generated by the pandemic**, and creating space for increased understanding and the promotion of our common identity.⁵ Examples include communication campaigns that stressed the need for unity to overcome the crisis; radio talk shows that provided a platform for young people to share their concerns and solutions with local authorities; providing food to the most marginalised; as well as promoting daily acts of peace and interfaith harmony in divided societies. In many cases, youth have been the first responders where governments and international organisations were slow to react. The collective, horizontal leadership style of young people has made a positive difference in the way they have been dealing with a crisis that has paralysed even the wealthiest, strongest states. At a time when the negative voices are very loud, young people are standing for the principles and values of peace and unity. This is a very **unique opportunity for governments and the international community to harness the power of young people**⁶ and jointly build a new normal based on peace and togetherness.



What needs to be done?

Enable youth leadership in peace & security, and in the prevention of violent extremism

As demonstrated during the lockdowns, young people have been at the forefront when it comes to celebrating diversity and promoting togetherness in times of hardship. Such positive engagement is essential to show everyone, including distressed youth, that there is more that unites us than divides us, and in collectively devising a peaceful future. **Instead of focusing on youth as risk factors, policy-makers need to support the agency and contribution of young people to peace.**

To multilateral organisations and member states:

- » **Invite young women and men to brief national and international institutions responsible for the peace and security agenda** about their priorities and concerns, and systematically meet with youth-led organisations. The **UN Security Council** is leading the way by receiving briefings by young people on the situation in their countries or on relevant topics. Institutions should not only engage youth in their formal processes but also connect their own efforts with the more informal initiatives that young people use to mobilise others and drive peaceful change.
- » **Dedicate specific funds to youth organisations engaged in peace and security efforts**, as per UNSC resolution 2535. The **Youth 360 grant-making approach** currently being piloted by Search for Common Ground and UNOY Peacebuilders in partnership with the UN Peacebuilding Fund and the UN Alliance of Civilizations to support young peacebuilders can serve as an example for other donors. Its focus on small organisations and non-elite youth groups is particularly relevant to the realities of youth-led peacebuilding organisations, which largely operate with limited budget (49% operating under USD 5,000 per annum)⁷ and therefore fail to meet most donors' eligibility criteria. In addition, investment in youth initiatives should not be only focused on addressing the threats posed by a minority of violent youth, but should aim to nurture youth leadership and resilience.
- » **Engage young people fully in initiatives aimed at preventing and counter-ing violent extremism (P/CVE)** from design to implementation and evaluation as a way to make these programmes more effective. Involving youth in early stages of P/CVE programming will enable national governments and the international community to tap into the decentralised youth networks that are already preventing violent extremism, including those doing great work in remote places, and with access to isolated and vulnerable communities. Youth can be a bridge to other allies in P/CVE and can ensure that donors' investments are reaching the right communities. The **AU-EU Youth Cooperation hub**, a [platform](#) gathering young people from Africa

and Europe to select, pilot, and monitor concrete projects translating the AU-EU Youth Agenda to action is a pioneering initiative.

- » **Foster synergies and mutual learning between young people engaged in PVE with those working on public health, education, social welfare, gender equity, etc.** through your events, training programmes and funding. The Covid-19 crisis has unveiled the intersectionality of PVE with deep structures of inequality, poverty, racism, and gender-based exclusion. More collaboration across sectors is needed if we are to tackle the inequalities and discrimination aggravated by the pandemic that are fuelling extremists' narratives.
- » **Actively increase the sharing of knowledge, lessons learned, and best practices of youth-led PVE efforts from during the pandemic**, specifically youths' abilities to adapt their approaches across multilateral fora.
- » **Include young people with diverse backgrounds in the international peace and security space.** This requires a deep dive into current practices of international and intergenerational cooperation to engage not only with the 'usual suspects', but also with the forgotten youth, those who are marginalised in their own society, who have never been exposed to the international community, and who can ensure a fairer representation of the diversity of youth identities and lived realities.

To civil society organisations:

- » **Engage more young people in civic actions** and mobilise them in advocacy efforts as a way to provide a strong sense of belonging and a purpose – thus offering a powerful alternative to recruitment by violent groups.
- » As extremists are stepping up their online propaganda, **support and amplify alternative narratives created by young people** around peace and togetherness to make them more effective and attractive than violent extremist narratives.

To young people and youth groups:

- » **Use your influence on social media to give a sense of hope** to your friends and contacts, and to help them manage fear constructively in this time of crisis when information is manipulated. The pandemic provides an opportunity to convey a powerful message with extraordinary reach because of the large audiences online. In fact, youth are well positioned to design new narratives about peace that are attractive to other young people. To design successful online messaging, (i) make sure that your message, messenger and platform are aligned; (ii) be very clear and concise in your messaging; (iii) be consistent in the frequency of your communication; (iv) stay authentic and visual to ensure credibility and attention.



Lift existing barriers to youth participation in political and societal efforts

Young people have demonstrated how fast and effective they have been in responding to the pandemic by helping the vulnerable, spreading prevention messages, and filling gaps in governments' responses. National and global leaders can no longer ignore that excluding youth from decision-making is detrimental to the whole society. **An intergenerational effort is the only way we can address young people's increasing distrust in institutions, solve the most pressing challenges of today, and build up the world's immune system ahead of the next crisis.**

To member states:

- » **Make intergenerational co-leadership a reality.** Youth inclusion in decisions and institutions that define political action needs to be institutionalised at all levels – beyond youth participation in processes that design youth policies only. Youth inclusion will make decision-making more legitimate, close the generation gap and increase the trust between the people and the state.⁸ As a first step, governments need to make sure young people are represented in their Covid-19 task forces, to ensure the unique challenges they face are addressed. Political incumbents also need to remove the barriers to office that exist for young people, including the minimum age at which people can legally qualify to hold elected government offices.
- » **Set up a dedicated institution that scrutinizes the potential effects of new policies and laws on future generations.** Such an institution needs to include young people. It will be an effective way to avoid short-termism and make sure that the long-term impact of government action is considered. Inspiration can be drawn from the **Future Generations Act (2015)**, which was passed in [Wales](#) to mainstream intergenerational justice across the work of public institutions.

To multilateral organisations and member states:

- » **Make intergenerational dialogue the mainstreamed format of policy events** from UN conferences to national and local debates. We do not need more separate youth summits or youth panels that push youth concerns and objectives to the sidelines. Instead, policymakers need to commit to ensuring broad representation of youth interests 'at the decision-making table'. As an example of meaningful inclusion, the **2019-2020 Action Plan** of the Office of the African Union's Youth Envoy sets out a [plan](#) to ensure youth participation at national, regional, and global levels through 100 Intergenerational Dialogues - including on the Silencing the Guns agenda - that are co-led, co-created and co-chaired by young people.

To young people and youth groups:

- » **Keep pushing governments to take measures ensuring age diversity** at all levels, from state institutions to the media and private companies. The current context of youth mobilisation is an opportunity to keep exerting pressure on leaders for increased youth representation by writing letters, organising petitions and contacting your legislator.
- » **Run for office** and take your part in decision-making processes, as a way to push for new leadership models and to demonstrate the added value of youth participation. Every step counts. School boards, sports clubs, local governments and national youth councils provide entry points for young people to influence decision-making.
- » **Build strong youth coalitions and empower your peers with skills and knowledge on non-violent advocacy strategies** to make leaders listen to and act upon the needs and priorities of different youth groups.

References and further reading

- ¹ In June & July 2020, youth consultations were carried out through a series of Facebook Live discussions with key experts which reached a total of 21,895 young people, as well as an online survey which collected the views of 285 young people mostly aged between 18 and 35 from 54 countries. The talks featured Petrider Paul (African Union Youth Advisory Council), Elhadj As Sy (Kofi Annan Foundation, joint World Bank/WHO Global Preparedness Monitoring Board), Saji Prelis (Search for Common Ground), Yasmine Ouirhrane (AU-EU Youth Hub), Erin Saltman (Facebook), Mridul Upadhyay (United Network of Young Peacebuilders) and Jayathma Wickramanayake (UN Youth Envoy) who discussed with the audience the effects of Covid-19 on youth leadership, violent extremism & youth-led efforts to prevent it.
- ² United Nations, [World Youth Report](#)
- ³ Over half of our respondents reported an increase in violence in their own community or country, more specifically in terms of domestic violence against women and children, online and offline polarization and tensions between communities, and online and offline movements of violent extremist groups, including violent attacks.
- ⁴ Respondents to our survey overwhelmingly agreed that peaceful and democratic processes - in the form of peaceful protests, petitioning, and voting - were the way forward in ensuring that their governments are moving in the right direction.
- ⁵ See powerful illustrations in UNOY's [Peace Corner Podcasts](#), Search for Common Ground's paper on [Youth & the COVID-19 Crisis in Conflict-Affected Contexts](#), [UN Youth Envoy's blog](#)
- ⁶ Respondents demand that their leaders implement policies that are focused, inclusive, data-driven, transparent, and collaborative in order to ensure economic and social justice. To tackle COVID-19, respondents expect not only nationally unified movements from their heads of state but also globally-coordinated solutions.
- ⁷ UNOY Peacebuilders and SFCG (2017), Mapping a Sector: Bridging the Evidence Gap on Youth-Driven Peacebuilding, The Hague.
- ⁸ See practical guidance on and theory of change of Intergenerational co-leadership in the [toolkit](#) developed by the Office of the African Union Youth Envoy.



A Kofi Annan Foundation Initiative

For more information about our projects:

extremelytogether.org

[Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#) | [YouTube](#) | [Instagram](#)

