



Policy Brief

Tokenism to Inclusivity: Youth, Peace and Security in Post-Coup Karenni State Revolution

No. 10, May 2025
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Executive Summary

Myanmar's demographic trend suggests a growing youth population, with those under 30 making up approximately 55% of the total population.¹ In 2020, around five million citizens gained voting rights upon turning 18. Youth constitute the largest group both globally and in various national contexts. Their significance has been recognized through the United Nations Security Council Youth Peace and Security (YPS) agenda.²

In Myanmar, the role of youth is recognised through the development of the National Youth Policy 2017 and the National Strategic Plan (2020-2024). Youth have a long history of substantial involvement in Myanmar's non-violent social movements, resistance, and peace initiatives. Despite their active participation, youth inclusion was overlooked in the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement and Framework for Political Dialogue, and throughout the democratic transition period. Following the coup, Myanmar's youth face significant setbacks and repression as they stand at the forefront of defending democracy. They regularly suffer arbitrary arrests, torture, killings, and violence at the hands of the military junta for participating in protests and political movements.

As state repression intensifies, youth encounter greater challenges. However, despite this ongoing repression, provisions for youth-inclusive peace, security, and politics in the Karenni State are emerging. Recognizing this promising development, this brief explores the YPS agenda of the Karenni political movement. By examining the strategies, policies, roadmaps, grassroots mobilization, and leadership perspectives on the inclusion and participation of youth in the Karenni Movement, this brief aims to enhance the YPS agenda. This brief presents a positive outlook and reiterates ways to strengthen stagnant practices to fully integrate youth in advocating for change and restoring sustainable peace and security in Myanmar.

[1] UNFPA Myanmar, "Census Atlas Myanmar: The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census," n.d., accessed March 2, 2025, https://myanmar.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/MyanmarCensusAtlas_lowres.pdf.
[2] UNSC Resolutions 2250 [2015], 2419 [2018], and 2535 [2020].



Key Takeaways (1/2)

Given the current state of youth participation and inclusivity in political movements, this policy brief emphasizes the importance for movement leaders, interim arrangements, political actors, non-state actors, and policymakers to:

- Promote avenues for meaningful youth participation through formal channels, such as setting designated seats with at least 20% proportion of youth in interim arrangement and future decision-making processes.
- Ensure strong leadership and inclusive practices which encourage the participation of youth, women from marginalized communities to co-design, lead and create youth development model.
- Recognise the role of youth in peacebuilding and nation-building by taking action of the youth voice and mobilizing youth as change agents.
- Empower youth by entrusting them with key tasks while providing coaching to help develop a long-term agenda for their future.
- Institutionalize meaningful youth participation at every stage of the policy and political processes such as youth council, youth inclusion requirements in law.
- Transform entrenched cultural, traditional, religious, and institutional practices that obstruct the inclusion and meaningful participation of youth through education, awareness, dialogue and policy.
- Increase youth access to education, healthcare, and legal protections, support reintegration and recovery programs, and implement youth protection strategies, such as safety and security programs.



Key Takeaways (2/2)

This brief also insists on the role of institutional donors, multilateral organizations, international actors, and donors to:

- Invest in the capacity building of youth and youth organizations through long-term strategic plans and flexible programs that encourage youth initiatives in peacebuilding and social cohesion such as intergenerational dialogue, youth led early warning and response mechanism for conflict and risks, reintegration program.
- Adopt a holistic approach to youth development in leadership, education, peacebuilding development, civic engagement, protection and political participation to effectively support peacebuilding and conflict resolution.
- Support community mobilization and youth empowerment programs via grassroots organizations, reduce procedural requirements, and encourage localization while maintaining minimal standards to reduce administrative hurdles.
- Create an enabling environment that promotes youth participation, inclusion, and engagement at all levels and embed force to push structural change in meaningful youth participation arena.
- Set a core working group for youth and invest funding for youth development programs on education, youth empowerment, civic space and job opportunities for youths from war zones and prepare them for post.



Introduction

As a significant segment of Myanmar's population, youth possess the potential to bring about meaningful and lasting change. The youth population, aged 15 to 29, accounts for 27% of the total, and this upwards demographic trend is expected to continue.³ Thus, youth are an essential and unavoidable partner in peacebuilding efforts in Myanmar.

The Spring Revolution emerged after the 2021 coup and has encouraged Myanmar citizens, particularly the youth, to engage in the journey toward democracy. This ongoing journey has become a primary focus for youth groups nationwide. Myanmar's youth population is now facing the repercussions of the coup, including the loss of access to education, freedom of expression, and repression by the junta through censorship, unjust laws, and policies. Despite these immense challenges, the youth continue to participate in protests and resist the dictatorship. One challenging task that the coup brings to the young people is the constructive role of youth in state-building within a divided society fueled by the military.⁴ Preparation for a federal democratic union through ethnic solidarity that envisions a common federal future plays a crucial role in Myanmar's current political landscape. Therefore, youth play a central role at this political juncture in maintaining hope and working toward the ultimate goal of a peaceful federal union. Empowering youth as agents of positive change in current political movements can influence whether the democratic journey will endure or peace will be achieved.

The role of youth as an asset and partner in contributing to peaceful communities was acknowledged in the landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250 on youth, peace, and security in 2015 and the relevant subsequent resolutions, UNSCR 2419 in 2018 and UNSCR 2535 in 2020. UNSCR 2250 established five pillars of action for youth participation: participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and disengagement and reintegration. As international attention on youth participation in peace and security has increased, so has the number of studies examining the challenges and obstacles to youth inclusion across various cultural, social, and institutional dimensions. The YPS agenda has challenged the common perception of youth as victims in need of protection. The opposite view of youth as perpetrators of violence or as a group that is easily manipulated is also being met with a call for meaningful participation of youth.⁵ What does meaningful youth participation and inclusion mean in the context of the Karenni State in Myanmar? We aim to discuss this question in this policy brief.

This brief explores the recent developments in the Karenni political movement related to youth, peace, and security. Analyzing the environment that fosters youth participation in the Karenni political movement will help pinpoint entry points for better integrating youth into sustainable peace and development initiatives. The model of youth participation in the emerging Karenni local governance structure is proactive and is central to accelerating youth inclusion in the political processes that affect them. Therefore, this policy brief also aims to spark a discussion on youth, peace, and security within the Karenni movement and to understand the movement's vision through its current strategies concerning youth.

[3] ASEAN Secretariat, "First ASEAN Youth Development Index," July 2017, accessed February 28, 2025, <https://asean.org/book/first-asean-youth-development-index-2/>.

[4] Su Mon Thant, "In the Wake of the Coup: How Myanmar Youth Arose to Fight for the Nation," Belgium: Heinrich-Böhl-Stiftung (2021), accessed December 30, 2024, https://eu.boell.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/Myanmar%20youth_FINAL.pdf.

[5] Ingrid Elene Anderson, "Youth, Peace and Security: A Qualitative Analysis of UNSCR 2250 and the International Response to a New Security Agenda" (PhD thesis, University of Oslo, 2019), 28.



The Evolution of the Karenni Revolutionary Movement

The Karenni State (also known as Kayah State)⁶ was Myanmar's smallest, politically most diverse, and historically independent state. Karenni State was never part of British Burma, according to the 1875 treaty between the Burmese King and the British.⁷ However, its lands were incorporated into the former British Burma territories under the 1947 Constitution, which promised the right to secede for the Karenni after a 10-year trial period (Article 201-6).⁸ The constitutional promises of autonomy were not honoured, which, combined with grievances stemming from military oppression, spurred the Karenni people toward their initial political goal of achieving "Karenni Independence". After nearly nine years of armed struggle starting in 1948, the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) was formally established as the political body of the armed resistance in 1957. Since then, the KNPP has remained the leading advocate for the rights and self-determination of the Karenni people.

In addition to armed resistance, the KNPP sought alternative peaceful approaches for political solutions with successive Burmese governments. However, achieving lasting peace proved to be challenging and often short-lived, such as during the 1963 nationwide Peace Parley and the 1995 bilateral ceasefire, as the Burmese governments and military leaders demanded armed surrender from ethnic armed groups and continued fighting on the ground. In 1976, the KNPP joined its new leftist alliance group, the National Democratic Front (NDF), which was united by a common agenda of pursuing a federal union in Burma. Since then, the KNPP's political goal has shifted from Karenni independence to federalism.⁹ By 2001, the KNPP and its youth leaders were nurturing this vision of federalism, shifting the party's original goal of independence toward establishing a federal democratic union.¹⁰

With this aspiration, KNPP participated in a political transition and signed a state-level bilateral ceasefire agreement and a union-level peace agreement under the Thein Sein government on 7 March 2012 and 9 June 2012, respectively. This engagement, however, lasted less than a term under the quasi-civilian government. The issue was passed onto the next successive National League for Democracy (NLD) led government. The NLD government again failed to find sustained solutions for peace in the Karenni State by exacerbating the situation over its Burmanization policies, such as building a General Aung San statue. This act fostered distrust among key stakeholders, including the KNPP, the NLD government, and the youth. It prompted the youth movement. The youth movement demonstrated the importance of inclusion and participation in Karenni politics. These lessons showed the crucial importance of youth inclusion and participation in creating a peaceful and prosperous Karenni state.

[6] Karenni State Consulative Council (KSCC), "The name was closely associated with the military and was not acceptable, so the Council urged the use of 'Karenni State' instead of 'Kayah State,'" Facebook, November 23, 2023, <https://web.facebook.com/KSCC.Karennistate/posts/pfbid0hPzB14Nj79HsrSaw7LtoBtr5Q8M2mHB85DQK3ZNMX5sK6YNUZ7u5fuH5owFS3fBwI>.

[7] The Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry, Report of the Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry, 1947 (Rangoon: Government Printing and Stationery, 1947), Chapter 5, accessed December 8, 2024, https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs14/Frontier_Areas_Committee_of_Enquiry-text.pdf. According to the treaty, "It is hereby agreed between the British and Burmese Governments that the State of Western Karenni shall remain separate and independent, and that no sovereignty or governing authority of any description shall be claimed or exercised over that State."

[8] Burma. Const. of 1947, <https://www.burmalibrary.org/en/the-constitution-of-the-union-of-burma-1947-the-1947-constitution-burmese-mnmaabhaasaa>.

[9] Tom Kramer et al., "From War to Peace in Kayah (Karenni) State; A Land at the Crossroads in Myanmar," Transnational Institute (2018):30-40, accessed March 10, 2025, https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/tni-2018_karenni_eng_web_def.pdf.

[10] Marcus Brand, "An Interview with Khun Oo Reh, The Chairman of Karenni National Progress Party (KNPP) and Karenni Interim Executive Council (KIEC)," My Constitution, August 1, 2024, video, 33:31, <https://web.facebook.com/share/v/1AEXoQdKpC/>.



The 2021 coup halted the peacebuilding efforts and processes at the state and national levels. With the emergence of the Spring Revolution and ethnic political movements, the resistance efforts reached their strongest momentum after the coup. In Karenni State, an interim government has evolved with the participation of political groups, revolutionary forces, youth and civil society groups to re-envision the new Karenni State. At this crucial stage, there is a heightened call for youth inclusion and participation in the decision-making processes of the emerging governance model, as youth are the primary driving forces of the revolution. This call, if unaddressed, could result in a vicious cycle of failure in peacebuilding. Without youth, establishing a federal democratic union and sustaining peacebuilding efforts would remain a dream.

Peacebuilding Journey of Karenni Political Movement Before Coup

There were multiple peacebuilding attempts along with the Karenni revolutionary movement before the coup. The KNPP, as one of the key actors in the revolutionary movement, made significant efforts to pursue peaceful methods for political resolutions with successive Burmese governments; nonetheless, attaining peace was difficult and frequently temporary. From 1963 to 1964, the nationwide Peace Parley marked the first peace dialogue between the KNPP, as a member of the National Democratic United Front (NDUF)¹¹, a pro-communist alliance, and General Ne Win's Revolutionary Council, which took power after overthrowing the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) government in the 1962 military coup. Unfortunately, the Peace Parley failed because the KNPP and NDUF leaders refused to accept the Burmese Way to Socialism and surrender, as the government had demanded.¹² Later, in 1995, the KNPP verbally agreed to another short-lived ceasefire with the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) military regime.¹³ However, this ceasefire did not last, and fighting between the KNPP and the military erupted again just three months later.

Under the new quasi-civilian Thein Sein government, the KNPP signed the state-level bilateral ceasefire on 7 March 2012. This was followed by the union-level peace agreement on 9 June 2012, which primarily encompassed agreements on ceasefire, the establishment of liaison offices in appropriate areas, and the holding of nationwide political dialogue.¹⁴ In 2013, the Thein Sein government's original peace plan to engage the armed groups bilaterally was replaced with the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) plan, which was a prerequisite to talks about political agreements with all ethnic armed groups.¹⁵ However, the exclusion of the Arakan Army (AA), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) from the

[11] Bertil Lintner, "Mirage of the United Front in Myanmar," *The Irrawaddy* (Guest Column), June. 29, 2009.

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/the-mirage-of-the-united-front-in-myanmar.html>. Bertil Lintner notes that the NDUF was a pro-communist alliance group and had six members; the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), New Mon State Party (NMSP), Chin National Vanguard Party (CNVP) and the Karen National United Party (KNUP) faction of the Karen National Union, the KNPP (joined in 1959), and a Pa-O faction. The alliance group was dissolved due to disagreement with the CPB, which was by far rightist and a Burmese-dominant party.

[12] Maureen Aung-Thwin et al., "The Burmese Ways to Socialism," *Rethinking Socialism* 13, no. 1(1992): 67-75, accessed December 4, 2017, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3992410>. Burmese ways to Socialism was a national ideology of the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma and a socialist economic plan were established by Gen. Ne Win's Revolutionary Council between 1962 and the mid-1970s, which Maureen Aung-Thwin and Thant Myint-U refer to as military socialism.

[13] Tom Kramer et al., "From War to Peace in Kayah (Karenni) State," 24.

[14] Paul Keenan, "The Karenni (Kayah) State: The Situation Regarding The Peace Process in Karenni (Kayah) State," *Burma Center For Ethnic Studies*, no.9 (2012): 2-3, accessed April 5, 2025, https://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Brief_The_Situation_Regarding_the_Peace_Process_in_Kayah_State_BCES_Jul2012.pdf.

[15] Burma News International. "A Reference Guide 2014," 2. A single, signed agreement between the government and all ethnic armed groups, with terms explaining the conditions and framework under which the two sides will stop fighting and begin political talks.



NCA process further exacerbated distrust. Despite the eventual signing of the NCA by eight armed groups in 2015, the KNPP abstained, citing the inadequate incorporation of their eight-point proposal, which included sensitive demands like ceasefire monitoring, security, military affairs, and the principle of inclusivity.¹⁶ The KNPP boycotted the first Union Peace Conference (UPC) organized by the U Thein Sein government in January 2016.

In 2016, the NLD-led national peace process became more inclusive, involving various armed groups in Myanmar. The KNPP attended the second UPC, which was renamed the 21st Century Panglong Conference (1st) by the NLD government from August to September 2016. Non-signatory groups like the KNPP were sidelined and invited only as observers at the second UPC. Until 2019, negotiations between the KNPP and a peace commission from Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's government had reached a deadlock due to military's killings of KNPP soldiers and a civilian in 2017 and a youth-led movement opposing the construction of General Aung San's statue in the Karenni State in 2018, which resulted in youth activists being injured and sued for their involvement in the protest.¹⁷ However, the military coup in 2021 halted the peace process.

These peace-building efforts and practices faltered after the 2021 coup, which has been a significant factor in the lack of successful peace attempts. However, the failure of the peacebuilding process, which involved only governments and senior levels of KNPP, also results from the lack of inclusiveness for all stakeholders in the peace processes, especially the youth.

Engagement of Youth in National Peace Processes

The exclusion of youth from the ceasefire and peace processes raised questions about the formal mechanisms for youth participation. As much as youth have the power and capacity to contribute to the peace process, they often face barriers to inclusion. Traditionally, youth were depicted as antagonists in the violent conflicts in Myanmar, often labelled as rebels attempting to dismantle the Union.¹⁸ However, the narrative of youth as either perpetrators or victims of the conflict has begun to shift. Young people have endeavoured to be included in the national peace process and have persistently sought to negotiate with successive governments to establish the country's first National Youth Policy, which acts as an entry point for youth inclusion in peace and security.

According to Altiok and Grizelj (2019), youth engage in the peace process in various roles across three separate but interconnected layers: in the room (at the peace negotiation table), around the room, and outside the room.¹⁹ In Myanmar, young people have participated in each of these three layers of the peace process. Firstly, they were involved in the negotiation and dialogue tables as technical teams, resource support persons, witnesses, or observers at the NCA signing ceremony in 2015 (5 youths), national political

[16] Martin Smith and Jason Gelbort, "The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in Myanmar: Promoting Ethnic Peace or Strengthening State Control?," *Transnational Institute* (2023): 81, accessed Jan 27, 2025, https://www.tni.org/files/2023-04/TNI_CeasefireMyanmar_web_1.pdf.

[17] "Promise Turns into a Status: Unsettled Disputes of General Aung San Statue in a Land with Untold History," *Atha* (2019): 47, accessed December 8, 2024, <https://athanmyanmar.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/En-Promise-turn-into-a-statue.pdf>.

[18] Paung Sie Facility, "Youth & Everyday Peace in Myanmar: Fostering the Untapped Potential of Myanmar's Youth," *PSF* (2017): 10, accessed October 24, 2024, https://www.burmalibrary.org/sites/burmalibrary.org/files/obl/2017-01-00-Youth_and_Everyday_Peace_in_Myanmar_Fost-en-red_0.pdf.

[19] Ali Altiok and Irena Grizelj, "We Are Here: An Integrated Approach to Youth-inclusive Peace Processes," *Office of the UN Secretary General's Envoy on Youth* (2019): 16, <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Global-Policy-Paper-Youth-Participation-in-Peace-Processes.pdf>.



dialogues like the first Union Peace Conference (UPC) in January 2016 (6 youths) and the second UPC (21st Century Panglong Conference) in August 2016 (30 youth).²⁰ The government's peace plan restricted youth participation in the decision-making process for NCA negotiations and political dialogues with the government, military, and NCA-signatory ethnic armed organizations (EAOs).

Youth also participated in the peace process by building coalitions among youth. For example, ethnic youth in Myanmar convened at their first Ethnic Youth Conference (EYC) in July 2016, which produced a policy paper titled "Panglong Paper". This document outlined youth-focused priorities and recommendations based on the five political dialogue themes: political, security, economic, social, and land and environment.²¹ This paper was submitted to the committee responsible for the National Union Peace Conference. Still, it was rejected due to the absence of a formal youth inclusion mechanism in the current peace process.

Finally, there was also the power of youth from outside the peace tables, which could influence the peace agreement. In 2013, youth joined a Peace March with civil society groups and religious actors from Yangon to Laiza in Kachin State, where a ceasefire was broken between the military and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO). During the Laiza Peace March, youth calling to end the fighting and re-open the peace talks gained national and international attention to youth's substantive role in the peace process.²² Additionally, the youth efforts at the community level, such as the Flower Speech, promoting peace messages in social media and the youth-led interfaith dialogue in the Meiktila Case in 2013.²³ These youth-led movements toward peacebuilding demonstrated that youth can be peacebuilders and agents of positive change.

In parallel with youth participation in the peace process, youth have advocated for the National Youth Policy as an entry point into peace negotiations since 2012. The first Myanmar Youth Forum (MYF) was held with over 150 young people from across Myanmar in 2012. At the second forum in 2013, the National Youth Congress (NYC) was established, which later coordinated subsequent forums and supported the policy's development.²⁴ In response to youth peace activism, in 2015, the NLD-led government pledged to create a National Youth Policy as part of its 100-day Plan. The policy was launched in 2017 and sets national strategic commitments across areas such as peace, conflict, politics, education, health, gender equality, and employment, involving youth representatives from every state and division in drafting and implementing committees. In December 2020, the National Strategic Plan for Youth Policy (2020-2024) was introduced shortly before the 2020 general election and the coup.²⁵ The policy was seen as an initial achievement of youth working with the government.

Despite the success of the National Youth Policy, it has faced criticism for being primarily developed by the government and the NYC, which represents youth from eight states and divisions, while excluding many ethnic voices. In response, ethnic youth leaders created the Ethnic Youth Conference, and formed the National Ethnic Youth Alliance (NEYA) in 2016. NEYA and NYC both aim to support youth policy but focus on different priorities:

[20] Paung Sie Facility, 17.

[21] Paung Sie Facility, 17.

[22] Paung Sie Facility, 13.

[23] Paung Sie Facility, 14.

[24] Paung Sie Facility, 13.

[25] "Myanmar Launches National Strategic Plan for Youth Policy (2020-2024)," Ministry of Information, December 29, 2020, <https://www.moi.gov.mm/moi:eng/news/2343>.



NYC engages in national and international advocacy, while NEYA addresses issues in ethnic and rural areas. As a result, limited coordination has occurred between youth organizations at various levels. Overall, youth participation in the national peace process at multiple levels may have arisen due to civil society advocacy efforts toward successive governments; however, no formal mechanisms exist for fully engaging them in the peace process, resulting in tokenistic youth participation

Karenni Way of Sustaining Youth Movement in Peacebuilding Endeavors Before Coup

There is an inextricable link between the recent developments of the Karenni political movement and the emergence of Karenni-led youth struggles prior to the coup. The youth movement in Karenni did not develop overnight; it has built upon pre-existing contributions to the region's peacebuilding. Nevertheless, within Myanmar's socio-cultural landscape, deeply entrenched hierarchical norms, an age-based hierarchy, and a prevailing distrust towards youth and women, along with societal hierarchies among young people, overshadow the voices of Karenni youth, resulting in their marginalization and exclusion from politics and the peacebuilding process.

Recognizing these challenges, Karenni youth groups and civil society organizations have worked consistently for decades to build the capacity of Karenni youth in leadership, governance, federalism, security, and peace at the grassroots level. Their goal has been to ensure that all Karenni youth gain access to essential political knowledge, engage in the political process, and are included in decision-making at various levels, with a vision of a genuine federal democratic union. This steadfast drive from youth and civil society groups led to the initial stages of developing the Karenni State Youth Policy. Furthermore, the youth bloc has emerged as a significant actor in dialogues and negotiations among communities and ethnic armed groups in the Karenni state, as well as in state-level politics rather than in national-level peace efforts.

Since 2012, the involvement of Karenni youth in developing the National Youth Policy has been strengthened through the organization of annual youth forums in the Karenni State by the Kayah State Youth Network. As a result of the determined efforts of the Karenni State Youth Force, the initial draft of the Karenni State Youth Policy²⁶ was formulated during the Karenni Ethnic Youth Policy Drafting Forum in September 2016. The forum served as a platform to advocate for including Karenni youth groups in the Union-level Youth Policy drafting process. Despite these initiatives, the government's procedures for drafting the National Youth Policy remained centralized, lacking meaningful consultation with youth groups, which overlooked their concerns and voices.²⁷ Consequently, the Karenni State Youth Force withdrew from the National Youth Policy drafting process due to the government's inadequate response to the youth's demands, which included revising the structure for establishing committees to develop the National Youth Policy, consulting with youth for drafting committees, involving ethnic youth in the drafting process, and demonstrating solidarity with other ethnic groups in various states and regions.²⁸

[26] Kantarawaddy Times, "Draft Youth Policy for Karenni State Released," Burmese News International, September 17, 2016, <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/karenni-state/item/2315-draft-youth-policy-for-karenni-state-released.html>.

[27] Union of Karenni State Youth, "Statement on the Discussion Regarding the Inclusion of Kayah State Youth Representatives in the Drafting of Myanmar's National Youth Policy," Facebook, January 5, 2017, <https://web.facebook.com/UKSYKarenni/photos/a.608652512663608/608652472663612/?type=3>.

[28] Union of Karenni State Youth, 2017.



Since then, Karenni youths have crafted their own Karenni State Youth Policy²⁹ with the support of local civil society groups.

The Karenni youth were also overlooked during the national peace process. They were only invited as youth observers in a joint delegation by the National Ethnic Youth Alliance (NEYA) at the second Union Peace Conference (UPC) in 2016. In contrast, Karenni youth played a critical role in state-level social dialogues and negotiations among relevant stakeholders,³⁰ including Karenni armed groups and political parties. Karenni youth have served as a bridge between older generations from political parties and armed groups in the Karenni State, helping to overcome a level of mistrust and lack of communication in pursuit of a common ground for state-level peace and cohesion. Obviously, the Union of Karenni State Youth (UKSY), an umbrella organization comprising six Karenni youth groups, seeks to foster cohesion and reconciliation among the older and younger generations of armed groups and political party leaders through effective dialogue.³¹ In order to enhance communication among multiple parties and the youth, the UKSY organized both official and informal workshops and meetings.³² One of UKSY's strategies is to invite political and ethnic leaders to speak at community forums or topical seminars.³³ Therefore, although formal youth participation in the national-level peace process yielded little contribution, a community-centered approach was essential in promoting social cohesion at the state level.

Meanwhile, the Burmese military's arbitrary killing of a civilian and KNPP soldiers occurred amidst the nationwide peace process on 20 December 2017 in Loikaw Township, Karenni State.³⁴ In response to this unlawful act, Karenni Youth activists expressed their concerns regarding the military's actions during the ongoing peace process with the government and the KNPP, aiming to uncover the truth of the case and seek justice for the victims. Unexpectedly, the youth activists were sued by the government for advocating and expressing their views about the military's extrajudicial killings of civilians. This case of injustice prompted the solidarity of approximately 1,000 youths and members of civil society groups, who accompanied the victims of wrongful prosecution to court for the trial.³⁵ This peaceful youth-led movement was viewed as the prologue to enhancing the youth's role in negotiations and dialogues with the state government on this political issue. After negotiations with the state government, the government pledged to ensure justice regarding the murder and forced disappearance of a civilian, and all charges against the prosecuted youth were dismissed in January 2018. Under the banner of justice, truth-seeking, and peace, this non-violent, youth-led movement has marked a monumental achievement for Karenni youth.

Another significant milestone for the Karenni youth was their resistance against the state government's building of the General Aung San statue, which occurred without proper

[29] "Karenni State Youth Policy," Karenni State Consultative Council, accessed May 13, 2025,

<https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/8742d3c7-cb19-4fb8-a9d7-dc21d623d9b5/Karenni%20State%20Youth%20Policy.pdf>.

[30] Irena Grizelj, "The Youth Space of Dialogue and Mediation in Myanmar," Berghof Foundation, (2017):15, <https://berghof-foundation.org/library/the-youth-space-of-dialogue-and-mediation-in-myanmar>.

[31] Union of Karenni State Youth, "Call for Youth Political Empowerment Training", Facebook, March 11, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/19xwP7H9A5/>.

[32] Irena Grizelj, 15.

[33] Irena Grizelj, 15.

[34] Union of Karenni State Youth, "Statement on the Lawsuit Against Five Youths Who Protested the Killing of Three KNPP Soldiers and One Civilian," Facebook, March 31, 2017, <https://web.facebook.com/UKSYKarenni/photos/a.608652512663608/782513565277501/?type=3>.

[35] Union of Karenni State Youth, "Statement on the Lawsuit Against Three More Youths," Facebook, January 23, 2018, <https://web.facebook.com/UKSYKarenni/posts/pfbid034h8o5qafnyzh4xNmS8fpzD4KeATMi2gaGKgX2tHRx2rwVns6hdeJwAPVJWmeou6ul>.



consultation with the local communities in early 2018. Despite the overwhelming objections from the Karenni youth community and residents, the state government disregarded the voices of the youth, which subsequently sparked youth-led marches, protests, and sit-ins. These actions objected to the dominance of Burmanization,³⁶ ethnic inequality and the construction of the General Aung San statue. They also called for dialogue with the responsible parties. In response, Karenni youth activists faced unlawful charges under a controversial law and endured injuries inflicted by police during the protests aimed at suppressing movement and dissent within the community. Nevertheless, the youth movement grew more substantial rather than losing momentum. As a result, the state government acknowledged the power of the youth and agreed to negotiate with the Karenni State Youth Forces to seek a peaceful resolution.³⁷

During these challenging years, the Karenni youth, along with youth-led civil society organizations and alliances such as UKSY, sought to take advantage of their solidarity and power to enhance the role of youth in politics, security, and peacebuilding. Karenni youth opted for an alternative approach to developing their youth policy, focusing on the previous government's negligence of ethnic youth perspectives and the top-down bureaucratic procedures involved in policy drafting. Therefore, the initial achievements of the youth were fundamental factors for following the Karenni political movement after the 2021 coup. These movements sparked youth interest in politics and the peace process, ignited initiatives to develop the Karenni model of youth policy, strengthened dialogue and negotiations with Karenni stakeholders, and played a vital role in state politics.

Youth Inclusion in the Karenni State Interim Arrangement: Does Youth Still Matter?

During the 2021 Spring Revolution, the Karenni State was one of the states that developed an emerging ethnic revolutionary governance model. The Karenni model of the interim government is based on federalism and remained in solidarity with the nationwide resistance against the junta. Before creating the interim government, the Karen State Consultative Council (KSCC) was established on 9 April 2021 as the primary policy-making body, which included youth-related policies and held the highest political leadership during the interim period.³⁸ Its members represent various stakeholders from ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), including the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), political parties, civil society organizations, particularly women's and youth groups, strike committees, and former elected Members of Parliament (MPs) from the 2020 general election.³⁹ The KSCC members drafted a de facto legal-political framework called the Karenni State Interim Arrangement (KSIA) at their first conference in January 2023, which includes the mandate to establish the Karenni Interim Government in its liberated regions. The Karenni interim government was formed with three branches to balance power: the Karenni State Interim Executive Council (IEC), the Karenni State Interim Parliament (KSIP), and the Karenni State Interim Judiciary (KSIJ). The IEC is responsible for

[36] Tony Waters and Saw Eh Htoo, *General Ne Win's Legacy of Burmanization in Myanmar* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-1270-0>. Burmanization is a policy of successive military governments to discriminate or oppress the ethnic minorities in terms of culture, education, language and religion.

[37] "Promise Turns into a Status: Unsettled Disputes of General Aung San Statue in a Land with Untold History," *Atha* (2019): 47, accessed December 8, 2024, <https://athanmyanmar.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/En-Promise-turn-into-a-statue.pdf>.

[38] "Introduction of Karenni State Consultative Council," Karenni State Consultative Council, accessed December 8, 2024, <https://kscc.karennistate.com/about-kscc>.

[39] Karenni National Women's Organisation, Union of Karenni State Youth, and Karenni Civil Society Network, "Federalism from the Ground Up: The Karenni Model of Nation-State Building," (2024):14, accessed December 8, 2024, <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2024/10/09/federalism-from-the-ground-up-the-karenni-model-of-nation-state-building/>.



delivering public services as an executive body composed of eleven departments, including the Women and Children Department and Youth Affairs Department.⁴⁰ The KSIP holds the legislative power of the government, while the KSIJ functions as the independent judicial body of the interim government, incorporating a hybrid judicial model that includes the Supreme Court under the jurisdiction of the Karenni government and the existing local and regional courts of EAOs.⁴¹ Given the optimism surrounding these political processes and considering the context of youth involvement, the institutional arrangements for including youth will serve as entry points for examining the political will of the movement, viewing youths as potential changemakers for peace.

Karenni youth are the main driving force behind the Karenni nation-state building and the federal democratic union of Myanmar. The acceptance and rise of Karenni youth into leadership roles marked the establishment of the Karenni Interim Government after three years of struggle. Karenni leaders understand the role of youth as one based not on automatically granted authority but on self-asserted responsibility, with leadership positions actively assumed by young people. This empowerment is anchored by the Karenni State Interim Arrangements (KSIA) and reinforced by the recent Karenni State Youth Policy (KSYP). These frameworks collectively ensure that youth participation is protected and recognized, embedding their influence within Karenni governance's broader political and social fabric. According to Khu Oo Reh, the chairman of the Karenni National Progressive and the Interim Executive Council of Karen State: "I am intentionally encouraging young people to get involved in all aspects of the struggle independently and take the lead."⁴² Youth have become the cornerstone of the Karenni political movement, driving change from the ground up. The youth policy emerges from acknowledging young people's vital role in the current struggle. The creation of the youth policy reaffirms the recognition of youth in political leadership.

According to the KSIA, the KSCC is the highest policy-making body, currently composed of four representatives from youth groups (including people's defense forces), strike committees, and civil society organizations.⁴³ In terms of youth engagement and representation, the roles and responsibilities of youth representatives in coordination with the Karenni interim government are outlined in the policy. In the KSIA, four points related to youth are highlighted. These points emphasize the participation of youth in decision-making concerning youth-related socioeconomic and cultural issues, a designated budget for youth development, the inclusion of youth in education, healthcare, economics, and governance plans, and the establishment of a youth affairs committee as a fundamental responsibility and plan for youth in the interim arrangement.

As part of this arrangement, the Karenni Youth Policy—adopted during the first Karenni State Youth Conference on October 21-22, 2023, by the Karenni Youth Forces—serves as a primary formal guiding document specifically designed for youth.⁴⁴ Developed through extensive public consultations held before the military coup, this policy incorporates the perceptions and recommendations of various Karenni youth communities, including

[40] Karenni National Women's Organisation, Union of Karenni State Youth, and Karenni Civil Society Network, "Federalism from the Ground Up" 51.

[41] Karenni National Women's Organisation, Union of Karenni State Youth, and Karenni Civil Society Network, "Federalism from the Ground Up" 22.

[42] Marcus Brand, 2024.

[43] Karenni National Women's Organisation, Union of Karenni State Youth, and Karenni Civil Society Network, "Federalism from the Ground Up" 15.

[44] Union of Karenni State Youth, "The Statement of the 1st Karenni State Youth Conference," Facebook, October 22, 2023, <https://web.facebook.com/UKSYKarenni/posts/pfbid02mq6PwChadT1G6atnSaTbhT7nFeikrG8gytexfGVGUDCgGFidwarbjYVNv946S4Zsl>.



Karenni ethnic youth, youth groups, and revolutionary youth forces. Backed by the KSCC, this policy confirms that young people possess the right to make their own decisions and shape their futures course. It empowers them not only to participate but also to lead, shaping their future with unbound voices. The policy defines youth as individuals aged 16 to 35, granting every Karenni youth aged 18 and older the right to be elected. The two goals of the youth policy are to empower youth to shape their own futures and to play a pivotal role in political leadership decisions. These aims convey a message to the youth about the interim arrangement, establishing that youth hold a recognized decision-making role within the Karenni State and in the national level peace process and related decisions, affirming their active participation in shaping state and national-level political processes.

The peace-related roles outlined in the policy serve as the foundation for youth participation in peace processes. However, it is essential to recognize that the diverse needs of youth cannot be met without acknowledging the unique challenges faced by Karenni youth. This acknowledgment is evident in the youth policy, which outlines essential measures pertaining to education, healthcare, peace, cultural preservation, drug use, science and technology, economics, employment opportunities, youth freedom, and the arts and music. One noteworthy aspect of the policy is its inclusion of measures that youth may require for rehabilitation following the revolution. The specific emphasis on measures targeting youth and women for security sector reform, and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration after the revolution conveys a positive outlook.

As stated in the Youth Policy, there was previously no existing policy that addressed youth and governance mechanisms for Karenni youth. Thus, this policy represents a fundamental step towards the inclusion and participation of young people. The policy-making process and its final output reflect the political will of the interim government. However, measures for youth protection are not included in the policy. Protection is crucial for young people, especially amidst the revolutionary conflict. Despite this necessity, there is an urgent need to institutionalize the practice of fostering a culture of youth inclusion. Furthermore, the interim government's ability to tackle youth affairs and meet their needs—such as offering empowerment opportunities and resources for prevention, partnership, and reintegration activities—remains limited. Although the significance of these areas is acknowledged, a greater investment in the necessary infrastructure and support systems is needed to effectively engage and empower youth in these vital processes.

The Interim Executive Council (IEC), an executive body and interim government under the Karenni State Interim Arrangement, formed the Youth Affairs Department on 5 February 2025. This formation signifies a promising development in youth-related matters. According to the department's head, Khun Thomas, the main priorities for the department at its inception are to develop support programs for drug addiction and improve access to education.⁴⁵ This represents significant progress. Consequently, Karenni youths have highlighted goals for the newly established Youth Affairs Department. A young man from Dee Maw Hso Township shared his hopes: "What plans does IEC have for

[45] "IEC Establishes Youth Affairs Department to Provide Special Support for Disadvantaged Youths," Kantarawaddy Times, February 6, 2025, https://ktnews.org/iec-establishes-youth-affairs-department-to-provide-special-support-for-disadvantaged-youths/?fbclid=IwY2xjawl35GNleHRuA2FlbQlxMQABHeT37l3MteAevgsXrw1iwC3MngNdcPDyMsOzXTcCaN5hH1ne8B2NQ6Lqg_aem_TPuOGR9WUcHYbfWO0XVjWw.



youths struggling with drug addiction and gambling? If the IEC can gain public trust and effectively mobilize support, the Youth Affairs Department will become one of the most powerful and reliable institutions”.⁴⁶ This aspiration conveyed to the department that including youth at every stage of the discussion is essential for developing sustainable initiatives that address key issues of youth and youth development in peacebuilding. Therefore, the role of the youth affairs department in promoting the status of youth as change agents will likely be evaluated by the Karenni youth themselves, as the fate of Karenni will be determined by the Karenni people, not by outsiders.

Reflecting on the overall development of political processes, the Karenni interim government explicitly encouraged youth inclusion in its structures and institutional environment. This progressive situation regarding Karenni youth policy and the establishment of a dedicated youth department paves the way for meaningful youth participation in shaping and leading the future of Karenni State.

Recommendations to promote youth inclusion at the state level in Myanmar

Political movements hold a significant position due to shifting political dynamics following the coup. Therefore, leaders and policymakers from ethnic non-state actors should utilize the youth task force to develop a win-win strategy for peacebuilding and nation-building efforts. *Sustainable peace and a unified vision can only be achieved if leaders establish channels for youth participation and inclusion mechanisms in local and state-level governance structures, create an enabling environment that allows youth to confidently express their views on peace, political arenas, and decision-making processes, recognize the potential of young people, assign them critical tasks to provide opportunities for growth and learning, and eliminate cultural, traditional, and institutional barriers for youth.*

International actors are at the forefront of global policy and agendas concerning youth inclusion. Funding decisions, advocacy, and emphasis on specific topics depend on these international actors. Acknowledging the disproportionate burden that youth face daily in Myanmar and globally, *international actors must invest in educating and empowering young people through long-term programs that adopt a holistic approach to youth development, carefully planning the various stages of youth from adolescence to adulthood. Moreover, flexible funding for youth initiatives will strengthen youth movements for peaceful action and innovative solutions. Additionally, advocating for youth participation in both formal and informal settings and national and international contexts will facilitate the meaningful creation of peaceful and prosperous communities.*

The development of the Karenni model for youth inclusion within the interim political movement represents a positive milestone, as the foundational steps toward establishing a federal democratic union progressively unfold. This achievement was primarily driven by the proactive representation and meaningful participation of youth, supported by civil society organizations. The Karenni youth inclusion model highlights the role of youth as facilitators of inclusion and social cohesion. By overcoming societal and cultural norms that restricted their participation, they have played a pivotal role in strengthening youth engagement in state-level peace dialogues, laying the groundwork for sustainable peacebuilding efforts and advocating for youth-related issues.

[46] IEC Establishes Youth Affairs Department,” Kantarawaddy Times.



The Karenni version of youth inclusion is iconic, as the shared political aspirations of youth envisioning their future are integrated into the institutional arrangement, with their rights guaranteed by the state-level youth policy, safeguarded in the interim arrangement. In the rapidly changing context following the coup, the interim arrangement champions institutionalized meaningful youth participation and inclusion. Thus, this model could serve as a sustained strategy for achieving long-lasting peace and development. Furthermore, this youth, peace, and security agenda under the Karenni political movement encourages federal processes to consider youth participation and facilitates pathways for youth inclusion in the state-building process. This process promotes the normalization of youth as changemakers and shifts narratives about them. However, these promising arrangements should be further accelerated and strengthened to foster an inclusive culture and create new gateways for youth-led peacebuilding initiatives for cohesive communities in the future.



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Acknowledgments

The development of this policy brief was made possible through the active support and participation of Jenna Sapiano and Khin Thinzar, who provided valuable feedback and guidance throughout the production process. The authors wish to express their gratitude for this collaborative effort. Deepest gratitude and respect are also extended to all Karenni youth organizations, grassroots civil society actors, and leaders of the Karenni Revolution for their unwavering commitment to protecting and empowering youth in the pursuit of a just and lasting peace in Myanmar.

This Brief was funded by the International Development Research Centre through the Knowledge for Democracy Myanmar Initiative, which has supported much of the Ottawa Dialogue's Myanmar research and programming. We thank them for this support.