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Policy Brief

Reimagining Peace: Young Peacebuilders and the Future of Peace Practice

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Executive Summary

The breakdown of the international order constitutes an inflection point for peacebuilding and peacemaking, requiring practitioners, funders, governments, and civil society actors to reimagine what comes next. The purpose of this policy brief is to inform that reimagining through the perspectives of young peacebuilders. The previous system worked for some, but not for all. This moment offers an opportunity to build something new that avoids repeating past mistakes and to develop solutions that are legitimate, durable, and grounded in lived experience.

This policy brief examines how young peacebuilders are already responding to this moment by organizing beyond formal institutions, and advancing social and political change through community networks, mutual aid, digital mobilization, protest, peer learning, and transnational solidarity. Drawing on the experiences and priorities of youth-led organizations within the United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY), the policy brief shows that young people are not disengaged from politics or peacebuilding; rather, they are redefining participation in ways that are more adaptive, intersectional, and grounded in experiential knowledge.

At the same time, young peacebuilders face an expanding threat landscape that includes shrinking civic space, online harassment, disinformation, surveillance, tech-facilitated gender-based violence, AI-enabled risks, and growing psychosocial pressure. The sustainability and effectiveness of youth-led peacebuilding therefore require stronger Holistic Security approaches, investment in digital and information security, more meaningful intergenerational partnerships, and flexible, accessible, long-term funding that recognizes youth-led organizations as essential actors of change.[1]

1 Holistic Security, a term coined by the Berghof Foundation, addresses the physical, psychosocial, and digital safety of peacebuilders. Dr. Veronique Dudouet (Sr. Research Advisor, Conflict Transformation Research Programme, Berghof Foundation), in virtual discussion with Aimee Breslow, March 16, 2026

Key Takeaways

1. Young people's peacebuilding and participation in social and political change have evolved in response to the breakdown of trust in formal institutions.

Many young peacebuilders are not disengaged; they are organizing through community networks, civil society spaces, mutual aid, protest, digital campaigns, and other forms of action that feel more legitimate and effective than traditional formal processes.

2. The challenges facing young peacebuilders include physical safety, digital safety, and psychosocial well-being.

Shrinking civic space, online harassment, disinformation, surveillance, tech-facilitated gender-based violence, AI-enabled risks, and psychosocial stress are interconnected threats that require Holistic Security protection strategies.

3. Digital technology is both an opportunity and a risk for youth-led peacebuilding.

Online tools help young people organize, document abuses, mobilize support, and build solidarity across borders, but they also increase exposure to surveillance, doxxing, harassment, data misuse, and repression.

4. Peer learning and transnational solidarity are becoming central to how young peacebuilders sustain their work.

Youth-led organizations increasingly rely on shared experience, collective care, and cross-border exchange to develop strategies, reduce isolation, and respond to hostile environments.

5. Flexible funding is a protection, inclusion, and effectiveness issue, not only a financing issue.

Youth-led peacebuilding organizations need accessible, flexible resources to respond to emerging risks, invest in digital and physical security, support well-being, sustain peer learning, and adapt programming as conditions change.

1. Introduction

We are living through and witnessing the breakdown of the international order. It is a time of transition; there is no going back to how things used to be, and the new ways have yet to emerge. For those in the peacebuilding and peacemaking fields, this moment of collapse is precisely the time to reimagine how we do things and to consciously decide what we want to build next.

One of the most urgent needs for that reimagining is to understand how young people, especially those already engaged in peacebuilding, are experiencing the world right now. Here, "peacebuilding" should be understood broadly. It includes young people working to improve their communities, whether or not they use that label, including organizers advancing human rights, advocates focused on climate and the environment, and others addressing the conditions that make violent conflict more likely.

The purpose of this policy brief is to inform the reimagining of peacemaking and peacebuilding through the perspectives of young peacebuilders. Recreating what once existed is not only impossible; it should not be the goal. The previous system worked for some, but not for all. We now have an opportunity to build something new. By listening to young peacebuilders, we can avoid repeating past mistakes and develop solutions that are legitimate, durable, and grounded in lived experience. This is the moment to take seriously their recommendations and expertise.

This policy brief was informed by the experiential knowledge of thousands of young peacebuilders who are part of the United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY), the world's largest network of youth-led peacebuilding organizations.[2] Each year, UNOY collects both quantitative and qualitative data from its member organizations through an annual membership survey as well as virtual and in-person convenings. This data includes information on the needs, priorities, and challenges faced by members (and, due to the number, geographical spread, and thematic diversity of UNOY members, is representative of most young peacebuilders globally). Thus, the findings and recommendations included in this brief are rooted in the experiences of a diverse range of young peacebuilders across the world.[3]

1. Seeing Through Their Eyes

To understand young peacebuilders, the first thing non-youth[4] must recognize is that young people today are interested in politics and activism but often don't trust formal processes and instead find legitimacy in other forms of social and political participation.

2 The United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY) is a global network of 141 youth-led peacebuilding organizations across 79 countries, which works to ensure that young people's contributions to peace and security are recognized, supported and sustained worldwide.

3 One of the co-authors, Giacomo Castorina Cali, in his role as Co-Director of UNOY, helped lead and directly contributed to UNOY's data-collection processes, including annual membership surveys and in-person and virtual focus groups and convenings. The analysis and recommendations in this brief draw largely on the quantitative and qualitative evidence gathered through those processes.

4 UNOY defines youth as ages 18 to 35 and non-youth as 36 and older.

The rejection of formal processes is a response to the consistent, systematic, and decades-long exclusion of youth voices from these spaces. This includes not being granted seats at the table and/or being involved only in a purely tokenistic manner. Many young people have watched institutional and individual promises be made and broken repeatedly, and the result is a rational turning away from formal structures.

Second, young people often define "engagement" differently than non-youth. When formal political or institutional processes feel unresponsive or untrustworthy, legitimacy is found elsewhere, such as community networks, mutual aid, local organizing, and other channels that are not always recognized by non-youth audiences. What some may label as youth apathy or disengagement is more accurately an inability of non-youth to see where and how youth are already engaged. In the last decade, many young people have contributed to peacebuilding outside formal channels, such as participating in protests, boycotts, and digital engagement, viewing them as more meaningful than voting or joining political parties.

Third, engagement among young people today is more experimental, unbound by silos, and free to occur across different spaces simultaneously. Youth-led civic action is pushing for more peaceful societies, democratic reform, economic opportunity, climate action, accountability, and the end of corruption. We can see how these issues have led to mass protests in Nepal, Madagascar, Kenya, and Tanzania, just to name a few. [5]

Fourth, young people are increasingly joining movements that address broader causes, including the environment, women's rights, and LGBTQIA+ rights, with urgency and a focus on real-world change. According to some sources, at least 70% of all Gen. Z youth are involved in a social or political cause. [6]

Young peacebuilders today are seeking engagement that produces tangible results, feels emotionally meaningful, and addresses their concerns about well-being, compensation and power imbalances. They are organizing more through informal community structures, civil society organizations and online platforms where creativity and innovation are unbound.

2. Trends, Challenges and Opportunities for Youth Engagement in Peacebuilding and Social Change

Today's trends make youth engagement in peacebuilding and social change more urgent than ever. Today's youth population is the largest the world has ever seen, and young people are already advancing civic, social, and political change in communities around the world. Yet the threats they face are rising, and the environments in which they work are becoming more complex. [7]

5 Erica Chenoweth and Matthew Cebul, "Why Gen-Z Is Rising," Journal of Democracy 37, no. 1 (January 2026): 5–14.

6 Meghan Carnegie, "Gen Z: How Young People Are Changing Activism," BBC, August 3, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220803-gen-z-how-young-people-are-changing-activism.

7 United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), "Adolescents and Young People," accessed September 24, 2026, https://www.unfpa.org/adolescents-and-young-people.

Their meaningful inclusion is therefore both a matter of democratic representation and a practical necessity. Lasting solutions require intergenerational collaboration, while young peacebuilders need stronger protection for their physical safety, digital security, legal rights, and psychosocial well-being. At the same time, they must be able to safely access and use the technologies, tools, and resources that help them organize, connect, document abuses, mobilize support, and sustain their work.

2.1. The Threat Landscape is Widening

Young activists and peacebuilders are increasingly exposed to a complex web of threats to their physical and digital safety and psychosocial well-being. These threats include tech-facilitated gender-based violence, online hate speech, polarizing algorithms, suppression of free speech, intimidation and harassment, disinformation, and the growing use of AI-enabled tools by authorities and other powerful actors. Even digital risks do not stay only "online." They can translate into offline targeting, restrictions on civic space, and escalating physical and financial pressure on individuals and organizations.

There is a growing need to protect young activists and peacebuilders by strengthening their digital security, physical safety, access to legal support, and psychosocial well-being, with the goal of helping youth actors navigate the visibility-risk trade-off while reducing harm to individuals and communities. As these threats multiply, young peacebuilders are not responding in isolation. Peer learning and transnational solidarity have become essential for youth actors to share strategies, reduce harm, and sustain motivation in hostile environments.

2.2. Peer Learning, Solidarity, and Transnational Learning

Across youth peacebuilding networks, peer learning and transnational solidarity are increasingly shaping how young people learn, organize, and sustain themselves. What once relied on formal training and slow-moving convenings is now reinforced by direct exchange among practitioners and real-time visibility into events across borders.

Peer learning has become essential. Giacomo Castorina Cali, one of the brief's co-authors and Co-Director of UNOY, notes that it is an inside joke at UNOY that peer learning is like a new religion. Members regularly ask who else is working on similar issues, what engagement with governments has looked like, what political buy-in requires, and what resourcing challenges tend to emerge in different contexts.

This focus is now woven throughout programming, both in online peer-learning sessions and in-person spaces. The emphasis is not only on expert-led training but also on exchanging lived experience and contextual knowledge that can't be captured in templates or toolkits.

Closely linked to peer learning is solidarity. As authoritarianism and hateful narratives rise globally, transnational solidarity has intensified. Young peacebuilders across continents are sharing stories, strategies, and support, making the work feel collective rather than isolated. Often, this solidarity emerges organically through social media, livestreamed protests, and shared images of support across borders.

Simply showing up for others sends a powerful message – we see you, we care, and we're with you. At its core, this work reflects a deeply human impulse to feel others' pain and stand against wrongdoing. Although global solidarity is not new, as demonstrated by international opposition to the Vietnam War, its immediacy is. Witnessing abuses and protests in real time creates a feedback loop that strengthens a sense of shared struggle across borders.

This kind of solidarity intersects with mental health and well-being, increasingly recognized as essential to peacebuilding and social change work. Trauma-informed programming matters, and peer support can help young people feel seen, supported, and less alone, especially when the wider environment is hostile. Increasingly, young people are becoming more intentional about leveraging this connectivity not only to respond in the moment but also to build longer-term relationships, shared analysis, and coordinated action across borders.

For example, within the UNOY network, member organizations are leveraging the network's structures to show support and solidarity for other member organizations operating in conflict areas. In an environment of shrinking civic space and increased violent conflict, this kind of organic collective care is a response to the mental health and well-being challenges that young peacebuilders face while living in an increasingly violent and isolated world.

Much of this peer exchange and solidarity is now mediated through digital technology. Online platforms allow young people to connect across borders, document abuses, and mobilize quickly, but the same tools that expand reach can also heighten exposure to surveillance, harassment, and repression.

2.3. Digital Technology

Digital technology has become central to how young people organize, mobilize, and document social and political action.[8] Youth activists use online tools to run awareness campaigns, coordinate protests, and document human rights abuses, often in organic, creative ways that emerge without formal training or institutional support. In Madagascar, for example, digital tools helped mobilize protests that contributed to social change. In highly restricted civic spaces such as Afghanistan, young people and diaspora youth use VPNs and proxy servers to stay connected, share information, and support civil society actors operating under extreme repression. Even where internet access is sporadic, activists have used online channels to raise international awareness, helping them circumvent physical and political barriers and remain engaged when traditional civic participation is blocked.

These benefits come with significant risks. Organizations such as UNOY observe that the rapid adoption of digital tools often outpaces activists' understanding of digital security. Many young people lack practical awareness of online safety, including how to manage digital footprints, secure communication channels, use multi-factor authentication, and

8 The engagement of youth, technology, and social movements is not new, as evidenced by the Arab Spring, but the degree to which technology has developed and its pervasiveness are new dynamics in this moment. Helena Puig Larrauri (Strategy Lead & Co-founder, Build Up) in a virtual discussion with Aimee Breslow, March 21, 2026.

protect organizational data. This trend is exacerbated by a lack of resources and reliance on volunteers in many youth-led organizations, which makes it difficult to implement thorough information and digital security protocols.

This gap is especially dangerous in contexts where authorities monitor online activity to identify and target activists. The same visibility that enables awareness-raising and mobilization can also heighten exposure to surveillance and repression, forcing youth-led movements to constantly balance reach with protection. The risks are amplified by the growing use of artificial intelligence by security actors, particularly facial recognition and other surveillance technologies. For protection reasons, the authors of this paper will not detail threats against UNOY members. However, organizations such as the European Parliament have documented case studies in China, Russia, Iran, Egypt, and Sub-Saharan Africa that illustrate the ongoing threats to young peacebuilders globally.[9]

There's an urgent need for greater transparency, awareness, and research because regulation and oversight lag far behind technological development. At the same time, many young peacebuilders view AI as a potentially valuable resource for under-resourced youth organizations. UNOY network members often rely on volunteers who balance activism with work or studies, and AI tools can save time by supporting brainstorming, drafting funding proposals, and organizing tasks. One example from Honduras involves a UNOY member who developed an app ahead of elections to help young citizens break down political platforms into more digestible content, making it easier to understand what candidates stand for and enabling more informed democratic participation.

AI can also improve accessibility, for example, through live transcription that supports more inclusive participation. However, these advantages remain closely tied to concerns about privacy, data ownership, and where information is stored, particularly when sensitive content is uploaded to AI platforms without clear awareness of server location, access rights, or downstream use.

2.4. Flexible Funding as an Enabler of Protection and Adaptation

The widening threat landscape, growing reliance on digital tools, and the importance of peer learning underscore a shared need: youth-led peacebuilding organizations require flexible, accessible funding to operate safely and effectively. Flexible funding enables organizations to respond to emerging risks, invest in digital and physical protection, support staff and volunteer well-being, and adapt programming to changing local conditions. Without it, young peacebuilders are expected to navigate complex risks with limited resources, rigid grant requirements, and volunteer-heavy structures that are difficult to sustain.

In this moment of intense change and crisis, funding remains one of the most pressing needs for youth-led peacebuilding organizations globally, especially in light of recent cuts to Official Development Assistance. The 2018 Missing Peace progress study found that roughly half of surveyed youth organizations operated on an annual budget of less

9 Rasma Kaskina and Angelina Cvetkovska, "Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Human Rights: Using AI as a Weapon of Repression and its Impacts on Human Rights" (European Parliament, 2024), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2024/754450/EXPO_IDA(2024)754450(SUM01)_EN.pdf.

than $5,000.[10] More recent UNOY member surveys show a similar pattern, with about a third of members reporting annual budgets below $5,000.

Eligibility criteria can be as exclusionary as funding scarcity itself. Requirements such as formal registration, audited annual accounts, or extensive paper trails remain out of reach for many emerging youth-led groups. Most grants, even those for $10,000 or less, come with burdensome application and due diligence processes, including extensive documentation, detailed narratives, and financial reporting requirements. Many informal youth-led organizations cannot produce these required documents or demonstrate a strong track record, which thereby limits their access to small amounts of potentially transformative funding.[11] These constraints push youth-led organizations toward volunteer-heavy models, accelerating turnover and making it harder to sustain institutional memory, maintain long-term initiatives, and build consistent relationships with communities and partners.

Furthermore, old rigid log frames, systems, and silos are limiting the ability of proximate peacebuilders to respond to local needs. The rigidity of these old systems is causing harm by reinforcing silos and limiting local responsiveness as new conflicts emerge. When freed from these restrictions, young peacebuilders operating at the local level can easily pivot and focus on what needs attention in this moment, thanks to agile organizational structures that are not slowed by multiple layers of bureaucracy. For example, one UNOY member based in Lebanon was able to shift from arts-based peacebuilding to humanitarian support during active conflict, something only possible due to flexible funding.

Flexibility is not a luxury; it is a prerequisite for relevance. Providing core funding for youth-led organizations is the gold standard because it allows organizations to adapt to their mission as realities shift. Core funding enables organizations to pause, redirect, and respond without lengthy approval processes to rewrite indicators or logframes. Core funding would also enable organizations to operate across narrow thematic silos that do not match the reality on the ground.

In this sense, flexible funding is not only a financing issue but also a matter of protection, inclusion, and effectiveness. If young peacebuilders are to lead meaningful social change in volatile environments, they must be resourced in ways that reflect the speed, complexity, and risk of the contexts in which they work.

10 Graeme Simpson, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth and Peace and Security"*
scents and Young People (New York: United Nations Population Fund, 2018), https://www.unfpa.org/resources/missing-peace-independent-progress-study-youth-and-peace-and-security.

11 UNOY advocates that the administrative burden of managing a grant be proportional to the funding provided. Organizations that receive small grants should not have to spend more time on administrative processes than on implementing the project itself. This alternative approach is possible, as demonstrated by the model put forward by the Radical Flexibility Fund. UNOY has successfully negotiated alternative due diligence methods with some donors, reducing the administrative burden on small youth-led organizations and enabling members to focus on project implementation.

3. Recommendations

The purpose of this policy paper is to guide non-youth actors in the peacebuilding and peacemaking fields to reimagine what we build next to replace the collapsing international order. To that end, most recommendations are for non-youth entities. However, in the spirit of intergenerational cooperation in building that vision, we have also included recommendations for young peacebuilders.

Recommendations for Governments, Funders, and (Non-Youth) Civil Society

1. Increase listening literacy and rebuild trust with youth

- Prioritize listening to understand (rather than to respond) and acknowledge young people's expertise.
- Meet young peacebuilders in informal spaces and networks where organizing is already happening, not only in formal consultative forums.
- Acknowledge the trust deficit caused by broken promises and extractive engagement; close feedback loops by showing what changed, what did not, and why.

2. Strengthen protection mechanisms through Holistic Security

- Recognize and respond to the threats young peacebuilders face as a result of their work and activism, particularly under authoritarian governance and during protests and periods of rapid social change.
- Adopt Holistic Security as a standard part of programming and partnerships, covering physical, psychosocial, and digital safety.
- Invest in ongoing care and risk mitigation (not one-off training), including incident-response pathways, well-being support, and safe referral networks.

3. Invest in digital and information security, and address AI-enabled risks

- Support tailored digital and information security training for young activists and informal groups, recognizing varying risk levels and capacities.
- Analyze how youth solidarity is built online, including the opportunities (reach, rapid mobilization, mutual aid) and the risks (harassment, doxxing, surveillance, disinformation).
- Call for stronger research, transparency, and regulation of the use of AI in security and surveillance contexts, including clearer safeguards and accountability mechanisms.

4. Shift funding toward flexible, long-term, locally led support

- Move away from short-term, project-based grants and rigid log frames that reinforce silos and limit local responsiveness.
- Prioritize long-term, core, and flexible funding partnerships that allow youth and grassroots organizations to adapt to changing realities on the ground.

- Scale and communicate flexible mechanisms (e.g., the Radical Flexibility Fund) while using them to surface broader lessons on "how do we fund youth?"[12]
- Shift resources and decision-making power closer to communities by implementing participatory grantmaking approaches where possible.
- Ensure administrative requirements are proportional to grant size and risk, for example, by simplifying due diligence and reporting for smaller grants.

5. Break down silos by funding what communities need and do

- Recognize that young people and grassroots groups often move across peacebuilding, humanitarian response, and development work based on immediate community needs.
- Design programs and grants that permit this flexibility (scope shifts, budget realignment, rapid pivots) without penalizing organizations for being responsive.
- Encourage coordination across sectors and among donors so that young peacebuilders are not forced to "fit" their work into narrow categories to access support.

Recommendations for Young Peacebuilders

1. Work in solidarity to make the case for youth-led peacebuilding

- Gather evidence and success stories from your work, then share them across your channels to make the case for investing in youth-led peacebuilding.
- Engage in peer learning with other young peacebuilders and youth-led organizations on fundraising to exchange best practices and innovative approaches.
- Continuously advocate to donors for flexible funding that is accessible to youth-led peacebuilding organizations and movements.

2. Implement/integrate a Holistic Security approach to protection throughout your work

- Develop safety protocols and risk management plans for activities, especially in contexts with severely restricted civic space.
- Build understanding of digital security measures to improve safety when operating in online settings.
- Integrate collective care into your work and procedures to safeguard the psychosocial well-being of your teams and the communities you engage with.

3. Promote equal intergenerational partnerships based on trust

- Assess whether the events, invitations, and partnerships offered to you are meaningful or tokenistic, and prioritize engagement where young people are treated as equal partners.
- Be vocal with non-youth stakeholders about tokenistic practices and educate them on how to engage meaningfully with young peacebuilders and youth-led organizations.

12 Radical Felxibility Fund, accessed September 24, 2026, https://www.radicalflexibility.org/.

About the Authors

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