



UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE www.usip.org

SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report explores how youth and traditional religious leaders are partnering for peace, how they might partner more effectively in the future, and the unique role to be played by those who hold both identities. Derived from a desk literature review, online surveys, interviews, and case studies, the report is sponsored by the Center for Applied Conflict Transformation at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP).

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Implementing UNSCR 2250 Youth and Religious Actors Engaging for Peace

Summary

- More than 80 percent of the world identifies as religious, and most of the world's most violent conflicts occur in countries with the most youthful populations.
- In December 2015, UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security was adopted, formalizing an international framework to address the critical role of youth in building and sustaining peace and preventing violent conflict.
- Youth are often the most vulnerable and affected by violent conflict globally, and yet tend to be excluded from peacebuilding efforts.
- Religious actors include traditional religious leaders and lay religious people, women and youth among them, who help shape a community's attitudes and behaviors, and those living in conflict areas, similar to youth, are often on the front lines, many working to prevent and mitigate violent conflict. Local religious actors are often excluded from formal peace efforts.
- Both youth and religious actors, despite having what are often shared objectives but a mutual sense of differing priorities and values, are eager for more meaningful engagement with the other.
- Trust needs to be built between youth leaders and traditional and nontraditional religious leaders.
- By identifying allies within the religious and youth communities, peacebuilding practitioners gain access to otherwise inaccessible audiences, reaching the most vulnerable populations.
- In leveraging the legitimacy of youth and religious leaders to engage vulnerable communities, peacebuilding practitioners and the international community can more effectively support efforts to prevent violent conflict.
- Including religious actors, youth leaders, and religious youth in peace dialogues on local, national, and international levels is thus critical to creating sustainable peace.

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Background

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security was adopted in December 2015, formalizing an international framework to address the critical role of youth in building and sustaining peace and preventing violent conflict. This historic resolution focused on five pillars of action to ensure that youth are included: participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and reintegration.

This report highlights the gaps and opportunities related to the implementation of Resolution 2250 through three of those pillars—partnership, prevention, and participation. These pillars are areas in which religious actors, youth leaders, and religious youth leaders can work together, and where international and local stakeholders can support them. As with any international program, engaging religious leaders as partners to the youth, peace, and security agenda is context-specific. Implementation should always reflect the local environment.

Evidence shows that peace agreements that include women and civil society are 54 percent more likely to succeed.¹ At the same time, the world's most violent conflicts are being fought in countries with the youngest populations.² Building on the adoption of Resolution 2250, the UN secretary general has mandated member states to collect evidence that proves engaging youth is an effective approach to peace and security efforts.

Another essential but often overlooked element in promoting peace and security is religious actors—traditional and nontraditional religious leaders, institutions, and ideas influencing the religious space. Although peace and security experts increasingly recognize the critical need to partner with them as part of local peace efforts, religious actors—like women and youth—are often left out of policy discussions and the implementation of formal processes to create and build peace.³

Recognizing that the definitions of youth and religious actors vary from community to community, this report considers youth to be young men and women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. Religious actors include traditional religious leaders, at the cleric level, who are often elders or men but include lay religious people, women and youth among them, who help shape a community's religious attitudes and behaviors or play key roles in faith-based social service arms and organizations.

In the midst of conflict, youth sometimes galvanize senior religious leadership into peace activities, as in Myanmar, where youth were the first to counter the anti-Muslim 969 Movement with messages of religious coexistence long before senior religious leaders did so, and to advance social relationships and pluralistic visions. Youth leaders such as these, who publicly represent multiple identities, can play a crucial role in building bridges across and between groups of people, including those religious, and help advance religiously motivated peacebuilding. Yet many international peace organizations seeking to engage religion as a part of peacebuilding tend to engage first with senior male leaders, who may or may not seek in turn to engage youth as partners in their efforts. Meanwhile, youth and elder religious leaders cite mutual mistrust and frustration as preventing them from working together effectively, a gulf that may be broadened by peacebuilding organizations' tendency to treat the "religious" and "youth" spheres as separate rather than overlapping.

Religion is generally important for youth, but many are also skeptical of religious institutions.⁴ Some youth are drawn to violent extremist groups in part, though not solely, because of a religious yearning and search for meaning and belonging. Because religion plays an important role in the lives of many youth, if Resolution 2250 is to be implemented successfully, religion and religious actors cannot be overlooked.

Youth leaders, religious actors, and young religious leaders have attributed their omission in formal peacebuilding processes and dialogues to consequential mistrust and misunderstanding on the part of many decision makers, especially from the international community, on peace and security policies. At a time in which religious youth are particularly vulnerable to recruitment to violent extremism, it is imperative that the voices of youth—especially those who are influential religious actors in their own right, shaping religious attitudes, practices, and behaviors—are not disregarded but instead engaged meaningfully and from the outset of policy and peace process design.

A desk literature review of nearly a dozen peacebuilding programs implemented by international nonprofit organizations that aim to foster intergenerational partnership between youth and traditional religious leaders of all ages revealed that interfaith programs and dialogues are the most common way that international organizations support partnership at the nexus of youth, religion, and peacebuilding. These programs typically involve facilitated dialogue paired with other activities such as community service, leadership training, or other skills-based activities.

A second, though less common, type of program intentionally engages youth religious actors.⁵ These remain rare because in most cases youth-focused peacebuilding programs target participants working in secular-oriented civil society organizations, often excluding young religious leaders, such as young clerics or imams, inadvertently. Similarly, religion-focused peacebuilding programs also tend to exclude youth. Little to no programming brings youth into religious peacebuilding, focusing instead on formal religious leaders. This exclusion results in limited space for young religious leaders or actors in international peacebuilding programs.

A third, and less direct, way international organizations work within this nexus is by integrating concepts of religious sensitivity into otherwise secular-oriented programming. For example, Search for Common Ground developed a toolkit outlining how to develop and implement more religiously inclusive peacebuilding programs that consider the needs of religious participants.⁶ The necessity of this toolkit highlights the reality that secular youth programs often fail to tailor content to account for the religious practices of participants. For example, international programs may host a workshop in a Muslim majority country without considering that Friday is the Muslim holy day.

Overall, most peacebuilding programs aiming to foster a connection between youth and religious actors convene youth around the identity of being young, insinuating a macro-level identity—youth—that takes precedence over religious or other identities. Additionally, youth are integrated as participants into religious peacebuilding programs far less often than religious themes are into youth programs. Intergenerational religious peacebuilding programs that bring youth together with older religious actors remain uncommon.

The first of the two surveys aimed to capture youth perspectives about engaging with traditional and nontraditional religious leaders on areas of shared priority, especially those related to peace and security. Youth were asked to share their feelings, experiences, and thoughts about the challenges and opportunities related to work with traditional religious leaders. The second survey aimed at the opposite, to capture the perspectives of traditional and nontraditional religious leaders about engaging with youth. It asked questions about religious leaders' experiences engaging youth in their communities. Both surveys solicited recommendations about how youth and religious actors can partner more effectively in the future. Despite attempts to circulate both surveys widely, none of those who responded to the second survey self-identified as religious actors. The views of religious actors were therefore analyzed using responses from those who identified as religious actors in the first

survey, which spanned generations, but was limited to twelve respondents. A future study should consider a larger sample size.

The case studies represent diverse peacebuilding forms and geographic regions and gather evidence and personal anecdotes about what works and the challenges that remain as youth partner with religious leaders.

Gaps and Opportunities

In terms of partnerships, youth and religious actors each evince a desire to build deeper mutual relationships. In the survey, youth and religious actors reported feelings of different values and different priorities, despite often citing similar goals. Participants noted that youth and religious leaders are primarily interacting through formal conferences and meetings, which tend to be one-off engagements and thus less likely to facilitate longer-term, sustainable collaboration.

When youth and religious leaders are brought together over longer periods and in more meaningful ways, such as codeveloping inter- and intrafaith programs, their shared values and priorities can be identified, facilitating trust and leading to stronger relationships and ultimately partnership. To implement Resolution 2250's goal of inclusive, sustainable partnerships, the international community should therefore invest in longer-term, more sustainable programming that allows relationships to develop between religious and youth actors, especially across generational divides.

In regard to prevention, religious youth—that is, youth who identify themselves as actively involved in religious communities—can serve as bridge-builders between religious leaders and youth, as several youth noted in survey responses. One example is through outreach and education, as the case study on the Uganda Muslim Youth Development Forum demonstrates. Implemented by religious youth, the organization addresses common challenges that Ugandan Muslim youth face and addresses the challenges with their religious communities. At the same time, it trains and informs religious leaders of all ages about how they can better work with youth to meet the needs of their community.

Studies have shown that youth often become radicalized because their basic needs are not otherwise being met and that they are not empowered with the educational tools with which to think critically.⁷ By identifying allies within the religious and youth communities, peacebuilding practitioners gain access to wider and otherwise inaccessible audiences, reaching the most vulnerable populations. By leveraging the legitimacy of youth and religious leaders to engage high-risk communities, peacebuilding practitioners and the international community can more effectively support efforts to prevent radicalization and extremism within the community.

In terms of participation, survey responses suggest that youth are still being excluded from peacebuilding dialogues and decision-making forums. When they are included, it is often through youth-only programming or the involvement of only a few privileged youth. Both youth and religious leaders also need to be included in these processes and forums.

Youth and religious leaders can work together to bring each other to the table, especially in local engagements. For example, senior religious leaders can bring youth leaders to policy discussions or they can make sure that clerical meetings are multigenerational and include young leaders as well as older ones. This collaboration will expand circles, combine spheres of influence, and foster meaningful participation.

Youth often become radicalized because their basic needs are not otherwise being met.

Analysis

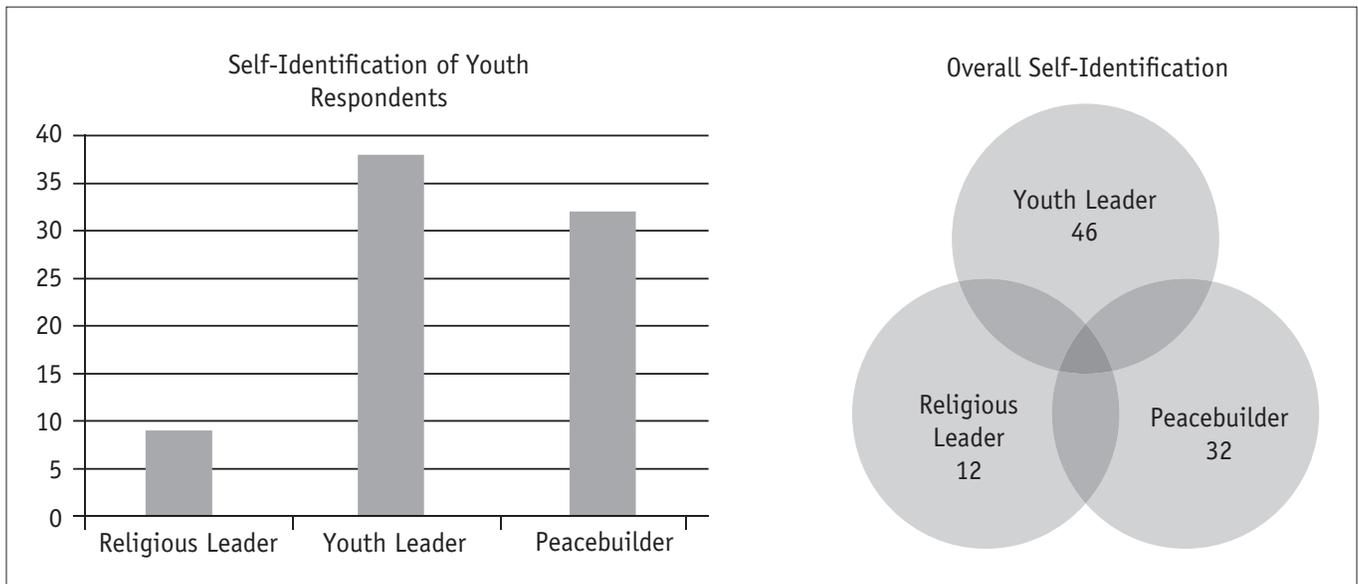
After responding to demographic questions, survey participants, who remained anonymous, were asked to respond to the following questions:

- In what ways have you engaged with traditional religious leaders or youth leaders?
- How would you like to engage with traditional religious leaders or youth leaders?
- What are the challenges you face when trying to engage traditional religious leaders as a youth or when trying to engage youth leaders as a religious actor?
- What type of partnerships would you like to see between youth and traditional religious leaders?
- What would you like us to know about your experience in engaging traditional religious leaders as youth?

Respondents came from eighteen countries in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Of the fifty-three responses, forty-six were from those between ages eighteen and thirty-five. (Thirty-eight of these self-identified as youth. The remaining eight are categorized as youth on the basis of their age.) Fourteen were women and thirty-two were men. Nine identified as religious leaders (one female), thirty-eight as youth leaders (twenty-eight male, ten female), and thirty-two as peacebuilders (twenty-two male, ten female). Of these, seven identified as religious leaders and peacebuilders, twenty-four as both youth leaders and peacebuilders, eight as only youth and religious leaders, and six as all three. Religious actors are those who identified as such in the survey regardless of age, for a total of twelve (see figure 1).

When asked to identify the ways they have engaged with religious leaders, most youth indicated formal meetings or conferences (80 percent), facilitated dialogue (74 percent), one-on-one meetings (67 percent), and nonreligious community engagement (59 percent). Nearly half of youth and more than half of religious actors engaged through religious ser-

Figure 1. Survey Participant Summary



vices. Notably, the least common way for youth leaders is online or social media (28 percent). This is particularly illuminating given that international religious actors often express a desire for better media training to connect more directly with youth through social media. Indeed, 58 percent of religious actor respondents say they are already engaging with youth online and 75 percent suggest they would like more online interaction.⁸

Asked how they would like to engage with traditional religious leaders, most youth selected all or multiple ways: facilitated dialogue, one-on-one meetings, and formal meetings or conferences (78 percent each). Religious actors responded similarly, nearly all wanting to engage in formal meetings or conferences. Sixty-seven percent of youth respondents would like to engage with religious leaders outside religious spaces in “nonreligious community engagement” and 57 percent within religious spaces in “religious services.” Those numbers were nearly reversed for religious actors, suggesting that religious actors may be less enthusiastic, or even less comfortable, interacting with civil society members, including youth, outside religious space.

Survey participants were also asked to identify the greatest challenges they face when trying to engage the other. Most youth (59 percent) thought that different priorities prevented them from collaborating more, and nearly half believed that different value sets were the issue. Interestingly, most religious actors (67 percent) thought that values were different, but fewer than half (42 percent) acknowledged a difference in priorities.

Only about a quarter of the youth and even fewer religious actors (17 percent) thought that no mechanisms were in place, preventing greater engagement. This suggests that those who choose not to work together may be doing so for other reasons.

A lack of trust is also a challenge that nearly one-third of youth and a quarter of religious leaders identified. It was brought up later in the survey when asked in an open-ended way to describe experiences engaging with one another, particularly from the youth side. “Most of the religious leaders do not trust us and they do not give complete authority to do youth work,” one noted. Many youth said they felt that the mistrust went both ways.

Regarding acquaintance, notably, only 2 percent of youth leaders said they did not know any religious leaders, and no religious leaders said they knew no youth leaders. This suggests that an absence of collaboration is a matter of agency and choice, affected in turn by other factors that need to be explored in more detail.

A significant number of respondents selected “other” challenges. Some, for example, wrote that they found one another to be inaccessible because of age differences or perceptions of differing social status (13 percent youth, 8 percent religious). A few added that religious actors were already engaging youth within their own tradition, but that the biggest challenge was to engage religious actors across religious traditions through interfaith or interreligious opportunities. A few noted that they thought youth specifically did not want to engage with religious leaders, preventing them from taking steps to reach out and coordinate. Only 7 percent of youth felt that there were no challenges in partnering between youth and religious actors.

The most responses were to the question of what type of partnerships each group would like to see between them, suggesting an eagerness to engage. Nearly all (96 percent youth, 92 percent religious) said they wanted to work with each other to implement peacebuilding programs or events. More than three-quarters of youth and almost all religious actors would like to partner to help them reach other groups to which the other might have access. Many youth (80 percent) and a smaller majority of religious actors also want to cofacilitate meetings or organize community-wide events. About three-quarters of youth and religious actors alike want to collaborate to create and disseminate shared messages or narratives, perhaps recognizing that cosponsored messages may have wider reach.

Responses to an open-ended question about general experiences of engagement were analyzed and grouped by trend or theme. Both religious actors and youth related proactive engagements and positive experiences, but acknowledged issues of inaccessibility and their unique roles. Youth also pointed to mistrust, lack of resources, and the challenge of identifying credible religious actors with whom to partner. A few respondents noted that religious youth leaders are particularly well situated to engage both youth and religious actors. Reflecting on positive experiences working with religious actors, one youth respondent wrote that “the traditional religious leaders love to work with youth in my country.” Another made the case to necessarily and strategically engage with religious actors:

In my view, the opportunity in engaging with traditional religious leaders lies in influencing them to use the respect and trust they command amongst their flock to promote dialogue for healing, restoration, and reconciliation as a means of preventing and deescalating conflict. Additionally, these traditional religious leaders intrinsically have more information about their specific context than outside actors. As such, they are strategically situated to play an important role in countering the violent extremism of minority movements through peace education activities at a grassroots level, research and documentation as well as advocacy and sensitization.

One youth respondent described the respect that traditional religious leaders command, particularly in rural areas, and said that he invites them to events he organizes, and “discussed with them the role of civil society, peace activists, and the better future of the world, which can only be achieved through our mutual existence, and then they listen to my opinions with great sincerity, and pledge to extend their support to the noble cause of peace and social work.” Reiterating this positive experience in partnering with religious actors, a religious youth leader wrote,

Since I started engaging religious leaders, through their effort, I have been able to have meetings with the hard to reach youth, where we are working to build peace in their communities. Religious leaders have helped me to get my message of peacebuilding, conflict management, and countering violent extremism to the villages and towns I wouldn't have been able to cover. Many listen and obey religious leaders, [working with them] in our work is a sure way of getting results.

In general, for those youth who have engaged with religious leaders already or regularly, the experience has been positive, but skepticism remains when engagement has not been possible or has been limited. Religious youth leaders in particular have a strategic role to play in initiating those connections, as the case studies highlight.

Uganda Muslim Youth Development Forum

Founded by two youth survivors of an al-Shabab attack in Kampala, the Uganda Muslim Youth Development Forum (UMYDF) was established as a faith-based peacebuilding organization that engages youth and religious actors, and especially religious youth, around a collective effort to integrate and promote values of peace and pluralism. Still managed by youth, UMYDF partners with traditional religious leaders through the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council of Islamic Education Affairs and the Uganda Union of Imams. They work together to build the capacity of imams to better address challenges faced by Ugandan Muslim youth. Innovative training that the Forum has hosted includes social media training to proactively counter messaging that promotes violence in the name of religion and to be

more accessible as religious leaders to a younger audience. Another training in partnership with the Uganda Islamic University sought to enhance the skills of Muslim leaders, with the aim of better connecting Ugandan imams with local issues facing their communities to more effectively lead their young congregations. The Forum also offered technical support to a new group of young imams responding to public demand from young Muslims for younger imams who could be more approachable and nonjudgmental and whose teachings are inspiring and resonate with youth. This group, formalized as the Young Imams Association of Uganda, serves as a clerical consortium that now reaches millions of young Ugandan Muslims through their network of member mosques committed to facilitating peaceful coexistence and fellowship.

The organization believes that to maintain a more peaceful society for all members of the community, it is imperative that the religious sector be engaged. UMYDF's founder explained, "The faith leaders could not be avoided if we are to build a solid, sustainable foundation for peaceful coexistence and development because of their sacred knowledge, influence, credibility, trust and powerful role in mobilizing (ideas, actors, and institutions), engaging and shaping public opinion."

UMYDF is run by and focuses its outreach toward youth, recognizing that "youth is the 'make it' or 'break it' stage of life"; youth are highly vulnerable and, at the same time, can be highly committed, passionate, and mission driven. Youth leaders can bring about drastic change in a society through civic engagement and peacebuilding. In particular, Muslim youth leaders in Uganda are driven and committed to give back to Islam, to humanity, and to their communities serving as the engine to UMYDF's work.

Despite its successes, the Forum continues to face challenges, particularly related to intrareligious conflict. Local, often older scholars and their followers teach and apply their interpretations of scripture and attempt to suppress the peaceful coexistence promoted by less formal organizations such as UMYDF and their partners. Another challenge is addressed in UMYDF's mission to build bridges and fill the gaps between religious youth and religious clerics. The founder observed,

Engaging the same old clerical men who are the institutional figures or authorities, gatekeepers of the community, most powerful and visible with less secular education, never challenged, very judgmental to the youth and women, exclusive in their way of work among others—is a great challenge in our engagement since they are anti-change for fear and suspicion of any ideas or methods or actors that might threaten their power source.

UMYDF tries to reach out to those older "institutional figures" by offering them support and training to equip them with the skills to diagnose problems within their communities, to be able to identify tensions that have political, religious, or ethnic roots, and to develop organic solutions in partnership with the community to address them. These trainings help UMYDF's network of imams better engage the older clerics as partners, too, and then build their own capacity as more effective, more respected community leaders. As more imams are trained by and partnering with UMYDF, the more effective at peacebuilding and more resilient Ugandan Muslim society and its youth become.

Youth Leaders' Exchange with the Dalai Lama

In May 2016, twenty-eight youth leaders from thirteen countries gathered in Dharamsala, India, for an interfaith exchange with His Holiness the Dalai Lama on resilience and the role

of youth in peace and security.⁹ All the participants had a background or deep interest in religious peacebuilding.

The goal of the program was to help break cycles of violence within conflict-affected countries by focusing on the young peace leaders within these communities, especially by promoting healing and reconciliation among them through interfaith dialogue and discussions on the human values of compassion and forgiveness, strengthening their capacities through knowledge-sharing activities on leadership, conflict resolution, and religious peacebuilding, and elevating their stories and voices for peaceful solutions.

These multifaceted approaches are required to expand both youth leadership and conflict resolution capacities as well as their emotional and spiritual ones, and in turn deepen their resilience and commitment to realizing a peaceful future.

Before participating in the program, youth participants reflected on experiences that young people face in their community, homing in on challenges and opportunities to engage religious actors in particular. Certain themes emerged in their responses. Religious leaders and youth leaders are simply not engaging, a female youth leader from Somalia observed. Others pointed to the vulnerability of youth to radicalization, in part because some lack critical thinking skills to consider different perspectives about religious issues. Furthermore, in times of conflict, divisions wrought by identity increase, where youth “have become hostages of these divisions,” which are often wrapped in religious terms. This has segregated them from youth and religious leaders of other religious communities. Yet, some posited, religious youth who are educated in critical thinking have the unique potential to deescalate the divisions.

Another commonly cited challenge—and opportunity—pertained to exclusion. Some noted that sacred spaces, such as mosques or churches, and their leaders are not adapting to meet the needs of a younger generation, and that therefore some youth feel they are not welcome or that their religious community is not able to serve their more urgent concerns, such as unemployment. As one youth leader wrote, “The role of the mosque is limited, and does not address the current challenges facing the youth in Islam, namely, providing opportunities for social economic development.” Some of these leaders are already working to change that.

A few participants from West Africa advocated for the need to reach out specifically to young women, to create space for them to safely engage in religious peacebuilding. One wrote, “Initiatives that adopt the religious route to peacebuilding should also fully involve women.” Others look to religious texts to study the interpretation of well-educated religious scholars that promote women’s empowerment from a religious perspective, thereby seeking to engage both male and female youth in discussions of women’s empowerment.

The exchange with His Holiness shed light on another opportunity, that of creating the safe space in which youth leaders can interact with an older, well-respected religious leader—in an environment with mutual respect and willingness to engage and listen. In the workshops, many youth noted that they have a hard time working with senior clerics because the clerics do not listen to them. Instead, they are always preaching at them, telling them what they should be doing. They had a sense that it was difficult to be heard by religious leaders, much less led by them.

His Holiness even said he felt renewed hope and optimism knowing stories of strength and resilience of the trail-blazing youth who are fighting in creative ways for peace. At the same time, the youth were affirmed and strengthened spiritually and emotionally by his wisdom and by the connections and bonds that they formed among each other. One reflected after the engagement, “I met people who felt emotionally and spiritually exhausted like myself, and learnt words of the Dalai Lama to retrace my motivation for starting on the

Initiatives that adopt the religious route to peacebuilding should also fully involve women.

peacebuilding path. I will find motivation to go on.” Another wrote, “For sure this program gave me the courage and the confidence to speak loudly about the importance of ethnic and religious diversity in any society.” A young woman described her experience this way:

The Youth Peace Exchange with the Dalai Lama for me is where I learn how to love and be loved. How to trust and care about others and be taken care of. It's where I challenge myself, let go of the past, be present, bring it fully and look forward to a bright future. It's where I receive enough support to get me going. It's where I get to keep moving. It's in one word, “My People.”

Adventist, Pacifist Activism in Colombia

Jacobeth is a religious youth peacebuilder in Colombia. Identifying as an Adventist, she is an assistant director of her local church and works with Sembrandopaz, a faith-based, grassroots organization that supports reconciliation and mediation in an area where conflict has broken the social fabric. A staunch believer in pacifism and harmony, she sees the fundamental necessity of religious young people in establishing and maintaining peace, despite the challenges.

Religious organizations like hers are critical to building a sustainable peace in Colombia, Jacobeth says, because they serve a unique role in the community relative to the politicians trying to impose a peace process. The church is seen as personal and local, offering spiritual cleansing and teaching forgiveness in tangible ways that are directly relevant to the community it serves. It also offers the easiest channel through which community members in different districts can communicate, going through the traditional, usually older, male pastors. As an organization, the church has structure and connections to create a positive flow linking communities. Because of these links, and because of the established official leadership role of the pastors within their communities, youth peacebuilders can work most effectively when they work with and within their church.

Religious youth leaders have a great potential to foster peace in that they might be more receptive to thinking creatively and can focus not only on their religious messaging but also on building bridges through common themes of peace that span Christian traditions. As a minority religious group in a majority Catholic country, Jacobeth's Adventist community needs to be flexible if its members are to work with other denominations to build peace, and youth are critical trailblazers in this effort. But, Jacobeth says, the church elders need to realize this and support their younger leaders. One effort that has worked well is the creation of youth summer camps supported by the church elders that give youth a space to work together and demonstrate the extent to which they are able to lead, to identify the challenges that they as youth are most strategically positioned to address, and to develop tangible plans to realize their goals. Opportunities to encourage religious youth leadership like this can be replicated and expanded upon.

[The church is] the easiest channel through which community members in different districts can communicate.

Youth Coalition Against Terrorism in Nigeria

In Nigeria, religious youth leaders are partnering with Christian and Muslim religious actors to promote peace, coexistence, tolerance, and understanding between and among religious groups.¹⁰ In 2016, the Yobe State Ministry of Religious Affairs and the organization Youth Coalition Against Terrorism held a partnered three-day event on capacity-building for conflict sensitivity in religious teachings. The conference also led to the establishment of an

interreligious council among twenty of the one hundred Christian and Muslim leaders in attendance, the aim of which was creating a unified voice of religious leadership against extremism. Participants were old and young, religious and conservative, men and women, and of different cultures and social backgrounds. The interfaith council will continue to organize monthly interfaith meetings, providing consultations and situational analysis, ultimately building resilience through responsiveness and leadership with a strong network with wide reach and access to diverse segments of the population in a region of the country that is particularly vulnerable to extremism.

Such a partnership through a regularly meeting interfaith council has both important responsibilities and the potential to shape community discourse. In northern Nigeria, Boko Haram projects itself as a religious movement, injecting religious imagery, symbols, and rhetoric in its communication strategy, swaying many to join the movement on religious grounds, luring youth above all. It is therefore incumbent on religious authorities to identify the voids that are drawing youth to join Boko Haram, and then to amplify a counternarrative within the religious framework. Many Muslim clerics who do not support Boko Haram are also not fully conscious of the drivers of extremism in their communities, or the implications and potential of their positive role in society. Religious leaders, Christian and Muslim, are often deeply rooted in their communities and have great influence in molding the attitudes and behaviors of their followers. They are enmeshed in their communities in ways that allow them to articulate community concerns and in their places of worship, giving them not only institutional platforms but also extensive social networks and channels for effective communication to influence their followers. The challenge is therefore to strengthen the ability of religious leaders to be more conflict sensitive through religious propagation so that their preaching does not engender violence and even can counter it. The training in Yobe State sought to do exactly that. The subsequently established interfaith council is working to sustain and amplify those mechanisms of constructive community engagement and simultaneously harbor a preventative and quick-response network between faiths and communities that are all affected by extremism.

Uniquely, religious youth can serve as bridge-builders to establish connections and to create trust among their peers, older religious leaders, and government and security officials because they are especially attuned to the needs and vulnerabilities among fellow youth in their communities. Youth can serve as allies and advocates to religious actors as well. Religious leaders put their personal safety at risk when they speak out against extremism, and youth as constituents and engaged civil society members can pressure local government to provide adequate security as needed to support the religious actors effectively. In addition, youth and government officials can work together to identify credible religious leaders and encourage them to speak out. Active participation and conscientious partnerships of youth with religious actors and the government sector are essential to inclusively prevent and counter extremism.

Conclusion

Religious actors, youth leaders, and religious youth leaders are already working together for peace and security. The international community can support these collaborations to ensure more meaningful partnerships that contribute to the implementation of UNSCR 2250.

The findings suggest a mutual desire to build meaningful relationships between youth and religious actors around the shared priorities of peace and security. However, perceptions of differing values and priorities are barriers to effective partnerships. Trust needs to be built between youth leaders and traditional and nontraditional religious leaders.

It is incumbent on religious authorities to identify the voids that are drawing youth to join Boko Haram, and then to amplify a counternarrative.

Through more intentional engagements, over longer periods, these groups can build trust and strengthen partnerships as they work for peace and security.

Youth and religious leaders are still being excluded from peace and security initiatives as well as decision-making forums. When trying to include the other, both religious leaders and youth leaders should turn to allies within the other group, including young religious leaders. Inclusive leaders and those with access to both groups can break down institutional barriers and weaken gatekeepers' roles in fostering exclusion. Youth and religious actors should serve as advocates for the inclusion of the other group. This will expand circles and combine spheres of influence.

Recommendations

Collaboration between religious actors and youth leaders will help bring key stakeholders into activities and processes, which will secure a more sustainable peace.

Identifying successes from the many youth and religious actors already partnering around concrete issues, such as those in Nigeria's Yobe State, drives a better understanding of unique needs on the front lines and thus greater capability to act on them in developing effective partnership initiatives.

Religious youth leaders can serve as key allies and bridge-builders between older religious leaders and youth leaders, as two survivors of an al-Shabab attack in Kampala demonstrated in founding the Uganda Muslim Youth Development Forum. Recognizing this is imperative to effectively advancing peace within a community.

Opportunities need to be created or made accessible for youth leaders and religious actors to connect, energize, and learn from one another. These avenues should include engagements that foster a safe space to strengthen relationships and that enable long-term, sustained interaction.

Working with older religious leaders to help them understand the importance of listening to youth and meeting them where they are is imperative to peacebuilding. At the same time, working with youth as partners is equally important to prepare them to engage with religious leaders by helping them recognize and respect the particular wisdom, expertise, and influence of religious leaders.

The role of young male and female religious actors as intermediaries between traditional leaders and vulnerable communities is unique and can help establish bridges of understanding, such as across Christian traditions in Colombia.

Youth tend to develop innovative approaches to enduring challenges and conflicts. This creative energy can be blended with the access and legitimacy of traditional religious leaders to codevelop peacebuilding programs. The Youth Leaders' Exchange with the Dalai Lama, for example, established a safe space in which religious youth leaders from conflict-affected areas around the world could exchange experiences and best practices with each other, and then share them in dialogue with His Holiness. This provided mutual encouragement—to the youth, in receiving recognition and validation from a respected spiritual leader, and to the Dalai Lama, in witnessing the incredible efforts of the youth to build peace in their communities.

To ensure meaningful participation of youth in peace- and security-related programs and forums, leverage the authority of religious actors to demand that youth are included in programs and decision-making forums. Five months after the Youth Leaders' Exchange, to take one example, at subsequent international engagements, the Dalai Lama mentioned

this group explicitly in remarking on the importance of partnering with and supporting youth leaders.¹¹

At the same time, when they are included in peace and security programs, youth leaders can encourage meaningful participation of traditional and lay religious leaders in peace and security programs and forums by recognizing their value as partners and advocating to bring them into peacebuilding programs. Religious youth leaders are especially well poised to ensure that the voices of religious actors are represented. In sum, each group can advocate for and support the other, knowing that their own efforts will ultimately be stronger for working together.

Notes

1. International Civil Society Action Network, "Better Peace Tool" (www.icanpeacework.org/programs/better-peace-initiative/).
2. In the five countries—Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Nigeria—that suffered nearly 80 percent of recent deaths from violent extremism, half the population is younger than twenty-two, according to data from the 2015 Global Terrorism Index (<http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2015.pdf>).
3. Susan Hayward, "Religion and Peacebuilding: Reflections on Current Challenges and Future Prospects," Special Report no. 313 (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2012).
4. The Pew Forum's Global Religious Landscape notes that more than 80 percent of the world's population identify as religious. At the same time, the median age of those is twenty-eight (www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/). According to the 2015 study by Zogby Research Services, "Muslim Millennial Attitudes on Religion & Religious Leadership," millennials (identified as age fifteen to thirty-four) in the eight Muslim-majority countries surveyed ranked religion among their top three principal sources of identity (www.zogbyresearchservices.com/new-gallery-3/).
5. For an example of a program in which youth were invited to engage in religious dialogue, see Imam Muhammad Nurayn Ashafa and Pastor James Movel Wuye, "Training Peacemakers: Religious Youth Leaders in Nigeria," in *Religious Contributions to Peacemaking: When Religion Brings Peace, Not War*, ed. David R. Smock (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2006).
6. "Accommodating Religious Identity in Youth Peacebuilding Programs," www.american.edu/sis/practica/upload/S15-Final-Draft-SFCG-Toolkit.pdf.
7. The Zogby study on Muslim millennial attitudes found that the top reasons for radicalization included corruption and lack of government representation.
8. For example, at the symposium Religious Actors Combating Radicalization and Violent Extremism in September 2014, religious actors noted that they need skills training to amplify their messages of peace through mass media and acknowledged the need to more proactively include and address youth and young religious leaders (www.usip.org/blog/2014/10/religious-leaders-countering-extremist-violence-how-policy-changes-can-help).
9. "USIP Youth Leaders' Exchange with the Dalai Lama," www.usip.org/programs/usip-youth-leaders-exchange-dalai-lama.
10. This section was written by Imrana Alhaji Buba to describe the work of his organization, Youth Coalition Against Terrorism, in Northern Nigeria.
11. "Visit to the Czech Senate Followed by a Public Talk," *Smartwatch News Today*, October 20, 2016, http://smartwatch.einnews.com/pr_news/350182326/visit-to-the-czech-senate-followed-by-a-public-talk.

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