

## Youth and Peacebuilding

Dr. Roshan Danesh

University of British Columbia (Canada), the European Peace University (Austria), British Columbia Justice Institute.

Also, senior member of International Education for Peace Institute

### INTRODUCTION

Humanity, throughout history, has disproportionately placed the burdens of war and violence on young people. With respect to children, political and legal discourse has recognized the need to completely do away with this tradition. For example, Article 38 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges signatories to prevent children under 15 years of age from directly participating in hostilities, and the Optional Protocol to the Convention increases this age to those under 18.<sup>i</sup> Such international legal norms are accompanied by widespread political condemnation of the involvement of children in war. At the same time, developments in other sectors, including the emergence of the discipline of peace education, speak to the central role of children in the global project of achieving peace.

As age increases, however, there is less moral and conceptual certainty concerning the need to protect young people from the ravages of war and violence. After all, adolescents have been the prime life-blood feeding the machinery of war, and continue to play that role today. There is an undeniable human tradition of young people working as mandated violent actors.

The complete moral outrage with which international norms condemn the linking of children and violence reflects common and shared perceptions of the meaning and qualities of childhood. Most, if not all, cultures traditionally seek to safeguard the innocence of children, and recognize within children an affirmation of human capacities for goodness. Our perceptions of youth, however, are different. While social, cultural, and economic forces all contribute to young people being conscripted as agents of violence, these are reinforced by normative expectations in many societies and traditions that youth are – in some manner – inherently volatile, and even dangerous. As one scholar aptly observed in reference to one particular context, “the ‘teenager’ seems to have replaced the Communist as the appropriate target for public controversy and foreboding.”<sup>ii</sup>

Predominant images of youth and violence serve as justifications for using young people as soldiers. They often also serve to reinforce structures, practices, and policies aimed at containing expressions of youth violence -- excepting those expressly sanctioned such as war – so that such violence does not form a serious threat to the established order.

Viewing youth as agents of peace challenges these traditional images of youth in war and violence. As opposed to viewing youth as a period of life in which violent behavior is something to be channeled and checked – a re-conceptualization of the qualities of youth takes place and they are seen as essential to the challenges of building peace. Such a re-conceptualization remains, relatively speaking, in its infancy. Theorizing about youth and peace, and programs targeting youth as agents of building peace, remain underdeveloped aspects of the peace education field. Elements of the challenges and experiments in this development are discussed below.

### DEFINITIONS

A core challenge in conceptualizing the role of youth in peacebuilding is the complexity of defining the category “youth”. The category can be defined in a number of ways, including through formal, functional, or social-psychological criteria.

Formal definitions are those that identify an age range, and classify every person who falls within that range as a “youth”. While obviously useful for programming and research purposes, it should be noted that there is significant lack of consensus on the appropriate age range. Most international bodies identify youths as individuals 15 – 24 years of age.<sup>iii</sup> However, this is by no means uniform. Lower-limit ages sometimes drop below 15, and upper-limits can increase into the 30s. The United Nations draws a further distinction between “teenagers” – (defined as 13 – 19) and “young adults” (defined as 20 – 24).

Functional definitions do not remove the formal emphasis on a specific age range, but do seek to define that range as a reflection of the roles and responsibilities of youth. From this perspective one might look at generally applicable social norms, such as those encapsulated in law, as setting a marker of entry into, an expression of, or the exit out of the period of youth: e.g. the age of majority; voting age; and driving age. Other roles and responsibilities that might mark a transition into or out of youth may not be legally or socially associated with a particular age, such as one’s first full-time employment, entry into or graduation from secondary school, adoption of familial roles, and so on. While functional definitions may still appeal to formal age categories, they also implicitly recognize that there will be variations in when individuals will assume roles and responsibilities of youth, and when they will pass onto those of adulthood. The explanations of these variations are many, and may include individual, cultural, and social factors.

Social-Psychological definitions of youth are less pre-occupied with particular age categories. Rather, such definitions suggest that phases of human growth and development are characterized by particular traits and patterns. There is a wide and varied body of literature that analyzes such characteristics.<sup>iv</sup>

Peacebuilding is also a term of varied usage. Common definitions associate peacebuilding with efforts that follow peacekeeping and peacemaking to strengthen the relations and positive patterns of engagement between individuals and groups. As such, peacebuilding might be described as encompassing efforts at unity-building, reconciliation, relationship-building and establishing greater social cohesion. Such efforts typically engage all forms of social institutions and networks, and have ramifications for the political, social, cultural, religious, economic, and legal spheres, as well as for change at the level of individual mindsets and worldviews. Given the grand scope of peacebuilding, it should not be conceived as a mechanistic or short process. In order to be successful, peacebuilding must be viewed as a long and complex process that times time and draws on a wide range of human capacities.

John Paul Lederach, one of the leading scholars of peacebuilding, does an excellent job of capturing its spirit and nature. Through four features – relationship, curiosity, creativity and risk - Lederach identifies the moral imagination he sees as the essence of peacebuilding.<sup>v</sup> In this vision, peacebuilding is identified with the human capacities to envision new and dynamic patterns of relationships and engagement, as well as the courage to pursue the concretization of that vision in the world. In pursuit of wide-ranging social change, peacebuilding draws primarily upon human creativity, to transform the largely unfamiliar – entrenched patterns of peace – into the norm.

Peacebuilding is imbued with an important proactive intuition. It speaks to what is possible in the creation and re-creation of human societies, and imagines new actions and ways of doing – rejuvenated lives and patterns of living. Thus, while peacebuilding may emerge in reaction to a situation of conflict, it seeks to be proactive in laying the foundations – through rebirthing – to also prevent conflict in the future. In this, one can see the potential relevance of peacebuilding

for all societies and all times. Truly, peacebuilding can be thought of as an essential life skill. In schools and workplaces, homes and communities, peacebuilding can play a role in transforming the present and moving towards a future with greatly reduced incidences of conflict. This is true whether or not a society is emerging from war.

#### WHY FOCUS ON YOUTH?

The varied definitions of “youth,” as well as some of the term’s predominant meanings and expectations, have acted as barriers to the emergence of youth as a focus of either research or program delivery. As one report notes, “in contrast to children, who are covered under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the ‘in-between’ status of youth has been largely excluded from the agenda of international peace and development efforts. Most conflict-related data simply omit them, making analysis and targeted programming extremely difficult. Youth have entered public debate and discourse mainly as accomplices in crime, suicide bombers, soldiers, or simply rebels.”<sup>vi</sup> As recently as 2005, youth were still being identified as a “new target group” in peacebuilding processes.<sup>vii</sup>

While the focus on youth may be new, it is accompanied by the recognition of how essential they are to peacebuilding. Researchers and programs have identified a number of reasons why this is true.

There are situational reasons, emphasizing that the social institutions inhabited by youth are fundamental to successful peacebuilding efforts. The most important of these institutions is, of course, the school. As schools are at least partially charged with the task of communicating and transferring societal norms and expectations, they are naturally important breeding grounds for both war and peace. Through their schooling experience, youth can emerge prepared to regenerate conflicts or move beyond them.

Implicit within the situational rationale is the seed of an ideal of holistic peace education. Not only do youth regularly congregate in a key social institution in which values and norms are transferred, but education itself can be an essential, perhaps necessary, element of peacebuilding. As Gandhi stated “if we are to teach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children” (Mahatma Gandhi, cited by Drew, 1987, preface) This common-sense observation is a core psycho-social rationale for the support of peace education – namely, that peace-oriented behaviors and attitudes, similar to conflict-oriented behaviors and attitudes, can, at least partially, be learned.

Thus, the understanding that peace (and conflict) can be learned provides a core justification for a focus on children. In many respects, this justification is weakened as individuals grow older and key phases in individual learning processes have already passed. However, the argument that youth should be a target of peace education programs is buttressed by political and economic considerations. The capacity of youth to be autonomous social agents and their propensity towards gathering and forming group associations poses both threats and opportunities. The threat is that youth may be easily mobilized to participate in disruptive action that leads to conflict and violence, particularly as a by-product of entrenched and endemic social challenges such as high unemployment rates. As a result, particularly in societies emerging out of protracted conflict where stability is absolutely necessary for social reconstruction, targeting youth as agents of peacebuilding takes on particular importance.

A final important motivation for including youth in peacebuilding largely rejects the idea that youth should be targeted as a result of the threat they may pose and contends instead that youth are actually characterized by specific qualities and features that are particularly conducive to peacebuilding. In this view, young people are understood as unique contributors, indeed the

likely leaders, of successful peacebuilding efforts; and they are, in fact, the primary enablers of social change. The traits of creativity, openness to new experiences, and desire for change, combined with the energy and vitality that we associate with youth, are all elements of the distinctive capabilities of youth to build peace.

#### WHAT AND HOW?

Given that the international focus on youth and peacebuilding has only emerged relatively recently, the mechanisms for engaging youth in peacebuilding, and the content of that engagement, are still in the early stages of experimentation. There are, however, two axes around which current activities and approaches might be conceptualized – the preservation/transformation of the status quo, and internal/external orientation.

Regarding the first axis, at one end of the spectrum are those programs that preserve the status quo, and at the other end are those focusing on transforming it. Many, if not most programs, will fall somewhere in the middle. Programs that focus on preserving the status quo seek to maintain stability in post-conflict situations once a cessation of direct hostilities has begun to emerge. From this perspective, peacebuilding programs may focus on the integration of youth within social processes and institutions in order to forestall efforts to mobilize youth to perpetuate conflict. In essence, such programs aim to remove obvious sources of political and economic discontent among young people. Distinct from such programs are those that aim to transform the status quo or position youth to be agents for such a transformation. Such programs are also essential for effective peacebuilding, as they aim to mobilize youth towards imagining a future without war. Transformative programs increase the amount of mental and social capital that is oriented towards embedding patterns of peace, and are dedicated to that purpose. While status quo-preserving programs stabilize the present, status quo-transforming programs open up the vista of a peaceful future.

The second axis has at one end programs emphasizing the internal lives and intimate relationships of young people, and at the other end are those focusing on the social positions of youth and their relationships with the larger society. Again, many programs fall somewhere in the middle of this spectrum. Programs that primarily emphasize the internal life of young people focus on engagement at the level of personal identity and worldviews, translating internal transformation into patterns of behavior conducive to peace and unity. Typically, such programs directly involve youth in reflecting upon, and seeking change in, their most immediate environments, such as their personal relationships, schools, and families. At the other end of the axis are those programs that focus on the place of youth within society and the kinds of social activities in which they are engaged. One focus of such programs is to provide more opportunities for youth to broaden their engagement in social and public life, whether through undertaking projects for the betterment of society, participating in mentorship programs, forming clubs or societies that have social goals and purposes, or benefiting from programs that grant them access to social institutions.

#### CONCLUSION

Increasing recognition of the essential role of youth in peacebuilding is now beginning to manifest itself in efforts to actualize that role. The future moral, social, and political challenge will be to see whether humanity can mobilize the energy, creativity, and vision of youth in pursuit of peace as successfully as it has in pursuit of war.

#### FURTHER READING

Borer, T. A., Darby, J., and McEvoy-Levy, S. (2007). *Peacebuilding After Peace Accords: The Challenges of Violence, Truth and Youth*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Curle, A. (1971). *Making Peace*. London: Tavistock Press.

Danesh, H.B. (2004). *Peace Moves*. Sarajevo: EFP-International Press.

Drew, N. (1987). *Learning the skills of peacemaking: An activity guide for elementary-age children for communicating, cooperating, resolving conflict*. Rolling Hills Estates, Ca: Jalmar Press.

Kemper, Y. (2005). *Youth in War-To-Peace Transitions: Approaches of International Organizations*. Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management.

Lederach, J. P. (1997). *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press.

Lederach, J. P. (2005). *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schirch, L. (2005). *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding*. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.

---

<sup>i</sup> Article 38 states that “States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities” and that “States Parties shall refrain from recruiting any person who has not attained the age of fifteen years into their armed forces. In recruiting among those persons who have attained the age of fifteen years but who have not attained the age of eighteen years, States Parties shall endeavor to give priority to those who are oldest.” The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict states that “States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that members of their armed forces who have not attained the age of 18 years do not take a direct part in hostilities.

<sup>ii</sup> Friedenber, Edgar Z. (1964). *The Vanishing Adolescent*. Boston: Beacon Hill Press.

<sup>iii</sup> For example, the United Nations General Assembly defines youth as between 15 – 24. For information on how the United Nations defines youth see <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/qanda.htm> (accessed by author on February 14, 2007).

<sup>iv</sup> Generally, the fields of developmental psychology, adolescent psychology, and the sociology of adolescence provide insight into the traits and patterns which may form part of a definition of youth.

<sup>v</sup> Lederach, John Paul. (2005). *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>vi</sup> Kemper, Yvonne. (2005). *Youth in War-To-Peace Transitions: Approaches of International Organizations*. Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, p. 5. (accessed by author on February 14, 2007)

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.* p. 6.