

Protection for youth, by youth: Youth, Peace and Security and Unarmed Civilian Protection

Introduction

Youth have an essential role in shaping peace, security, and protection. The impacts of violent conflict on young people are multifaceted and well known: from the mental and physical traumas of violence, disruption of education, social safety nets, and development, recruitment as soldiers, to sexual and gender-based violence, youth around the world face untold challenges. At the same time, youth are essential agents in tackling these impacts head-on as they lead on protection, violence prevention, and peacebuilding.

The Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda, originally set out in [United Nations Security Resolution 2250](#), has provided a critical platform for illuminating the protection needs and peacebuilding power of young people. At the same time, to date the agenda has not explicitly articulated a role for youth as agents of civilian protection. This is despite the role that youth (alongside other civilians) play in directly responding to violence in their own communities, often as first responders. Explicit articulation of and engagement with the role of youth as agents of protection offers an opportunity to strengthen the YPS agenda, civilian protection, and peacebuilding into the future.

As a field of practice, Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) offers unique insights into how youth around the world are already leading civilian protection initiatives, working to keep themselves,



Nonviolent Peaceforce Youth Protection Teams on the launch of 16 Days of Activism in Yei, South Sudan 2020
Photo: Nonviolent Peaceforce


their friends, families and communities safe. UCP provides tools that communities – including youth – use as they work to protect one another and transform violent conflict. It is a practice grounded in civilian agency and action, and as members of their communities, youth are essential to the effective practice of UCP. UCP also has a unique role to play in protecting the civic space within which youth exercise this agency, with UCP tools used to create space for young people to participate in political, social, and economic life, including in the face of violent threats.

Youth as agents of protection

As affirmed in Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015) and subsequent reports, youth are essential agents in the prevention of violence and peacebuilding. UCP is a framework that helps realize these goals by supporting the inherent capacity of youth to transform conflicts through deep community engagement and the support and development of inclusive, local peace infrastructures for sustaining peace.

From conducting protective patrols, to mobilising Youth Protection Teams, to conducting mediation, youth are demonstrating what it means to use unarmed and nonviolent strategies to build peace, security and safety in their communities. Nonviolent Peaceforce and a range of other UCP organisations provide support to young people working to implement UCP practices in their communities.

For example, young people around the world are forming their own protection teams. In South Sudan, youth accompany women at risk of violence collecting firewood, and deter children from travelling or playing along high-risk roads. According to one woman who has been accompanied, [“When the youth start the patrolling, we the women follow them, some women watch for attackers up from a tree and the ground while most of us collect firewood.”](#) In the [United States](#), youth in Minneapolis have mobilised to provide protection during various events in the community—especially focused on youth protection. In Sudan, youth leaders have completed training in UCP and are now teaching UCP in their own communities, including in several IDP camps. In Iraq, a young man trained in UCP reported that “We learned that we can prevent problems if we control our feeling when we feel angry and this will reduce or prevent violence



*June 2021: Nonviolent Peaceforce ran a safety team of more than 100 volunteers in the United States for the Brooklyn Liberation Action to #ProtectTransYouth. Over a period of 9 hours, the team provided unarmed civilian protection for thousands, with a special focus on the Black Trans youth at the event.
Photo: Cole Witter*

as well as controlling ourselves helps us maintain the relationship among each other.” This mobilisation of youth as protection actors is echoed around the world.¹

Protecting youth through UCP

As highlighted in the recent [Global Report on Protecting Young People in Civic Space](#), the protection of young people from violence whilst participating in civic life is also essential, and an area in which UCP is also an effective tool for protection. Young people are facing the challenges of exclusion and marginalization, infringement on safety and rights, and lack access to resources and support for their work.

Around the world, UCP tools utilized by a range of organisations and communities are being used to create space for young people to participate in political, social, and economic life, including in the face of violent threats. This includes providing protective presence and accompaniment for young people participating in public actions, such as the work of a Nonviolent Peaceforce-led Safety Team in the United States comprised of more than 100 civilians at the Brooklyn Liberation Action for Black Trans Youth. This youth action was attended by over 5,000 people. The Safety Team provided police monitoring and interlocution, interpositioning, and protective presence in the face of a number of reported and observed violent threats to youth safety.

Unarmed civilian protection tools are also being used to create space to support youth who are involved in violence and other activities by providing alternative pathways to engagement and connection. This kind of violence interruption has been successfully implemented by a range of UCP organisations, such as work with violent youth groups by Nonviolent Peaceforce in South Sudan, where groups are mostly formed in the precarious context of refugee camps. A similar approach – developing meaningful alternative activities for youth and thereby encouraging them to leave negative influence groups – is proving successful in the context of the displacement camps. Many youths move from involvement in violence to participating in violence prevention and protection programs such as the [Youth Protection Teams](#). Similar successes have been documented in the United States, where a range of UCP programs – such as that implemented by [Cure Violence](#), and a range of independent community-based organisations – are demonstrating the value of unarmed and nonviolent approaches in the context of youth violence.



Urgent actions:

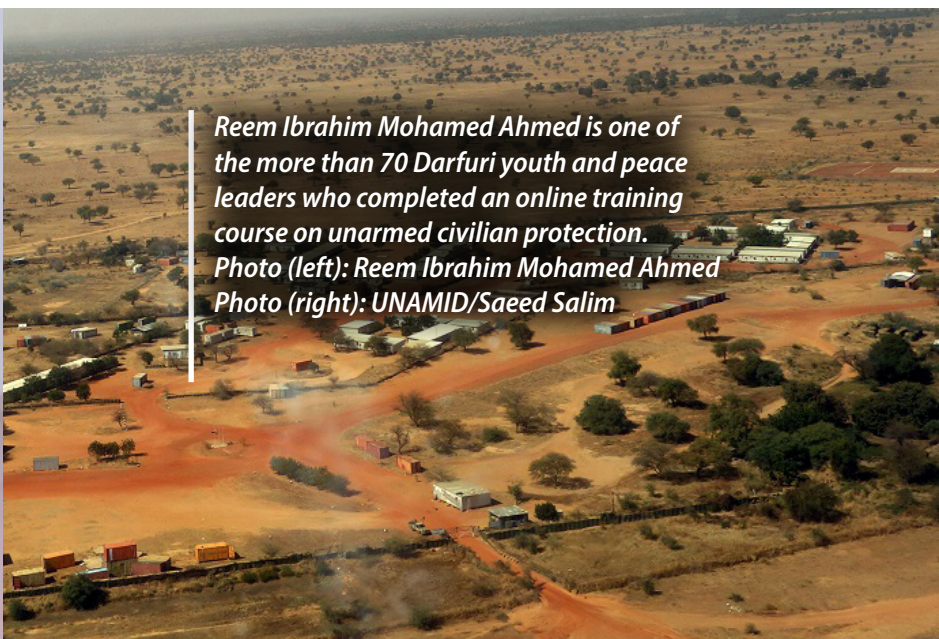
Recognition of the connections between YPS and UCP offers a promising pathway for deepening understandings of youth agency in the context of peace and security. In addition to the role of youth in violence prevention and peacebuilding identified in Resolution 2250, it is essential that youth agency and action in the context of civilian protection be acknowledged and meaningfully included, and that strategies be put in place to support youth efforts in this space. Unarmed civilian protection offers a promising foundation for such efforts and should be recognized in UN YPS policy frameworks moving forward.

Of course, around the world the rights of youth to participate freely in public life and discourse are under threat. Violations of human rights of youth are a major concern. Creating safe spaces for youth participation is essential, and investment in UCP mechanisms is one pathway to enlarging opportunities for youth to participate safely in public discourse.

To this end, we call for:

1. Elevating recognition of youth as peacebuilding and protection actors in their own right in responses to violent conflict;
2. Youth-designed and youth-led mechanisms to be at the forefront of protection responses before, during, and after violent conflict events;
3. UN Member States and other funders of YPS initiatives to increase funding for implementation of the YPS agenda, with accessible resourcing specifically directed to youth-led organisations using UCP tools for peacebuilding and protection;
4. That UN and other international actors conducting development, peacebuilding, protection, and humanitarian programmes and initiatives enable youth leadership in project and programme conceptualization, planning, implementation, as well as monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL).

¹ For additional examples, see: [Darfuri Youth Activists Working for Peace](#); [Silencing The Guns: Interviews With Youth and Peace Leaders in Darfur - Part 1](#); [Silencing The Guns: Interviews With Youth and Peace Leaders in Darfur - Part 2](#); [A Gathering Turned into a Collective Mission](#)



Reem Ibrahim Mohamed Ahmed is one of the more than 70 Darfuri youth and peace leaders who completed an online training course on unarmed civilian protection. Photo (left): Reem Ibrahim Mohamed Ahmed Photo (right): UNAMID/Saeed Salim