

What peace means to young people, and how they are building it

A Listening Exercise

July 2022

Written by: Beth Hollowell, American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and Cecile Adrian, Quaker UN Office (QUNO)

Meaningful political inclusion and participation of young people is key for building lasting peace and sustainable development. Under its “Youth, Peace and Security” (YPS) policy agenda the UN has increasingly created opportunities for young peacebuilders. However, fundamental challenges, like protection, remain and truly inclusive and partner-based policies and practices are not yet the norm.

In May 2022, the Quaker UN Office (QUNO) launched a Youth Listening Exercise and activities that focus on strengthening youth inclusion and advocating for United Nations policies that reflect youth identified priorities. This initiative, which will continue through the year, includes consultations with young people throughout the world to listen and learn from their peacebuilding experience. Additionally, the discussions include questions to elicit feedback on QUNO’s proposed new line of work around youth inclusion within the UN’s YPS agenda and collect ideas for how QUNO can follow up on these discussions. The first such listening exercise was held virtually on 31 May with people ages 18-34 living in the United States. Cecile Adrian from QUNO moderated the discussion with support from Kavita Desai, Beth Hollowell, and Summer Sparacin. This summary provides information on the key findings and themes that emerged.

I. Key findings

- Participants understood peace in both individual and structural terms.
- Participants identified numerous obstacles to peace in their communities including a violent police force, militarized border checkpoints, surveillance from border patrol, and unresolved historical violence/the legacy of genocide.
- Participants shared that local “pockets of peace” and community-building provided spaces where people could breathe and build peaceful lives together.
- Participants are deeply engaged in their communities through grassroots and civil society/non-profit efforts
- Participants had little working knowledge of the UN or how they could engage with it. They also had no prior knowledge and some confusion around what “youth peace and security” meant.
- Many participants did not feel that the US government represents their interests at the UN and that American exceptionalism is an obstacle to multilateralism.
- Participants highlighted educational justice, climate change action, environmental justice, addressing hunger and passing Child Nutrition Act Reauthorization, police reform or total abolition, justice reform/access to justice, shifting investments away from security towards community

development, drug prevention and harm reduction and housing accessibility as issues that should be included in a US YPS National Action Plan.

II. Emergent themes

Participants understood peace in both individual and structural terms. Participants had a nuanced understanding of peace as more than the absence of war. They identified peace as an individual-level phenomenon (e.g. inner peace, personal comfort) and a social/structural-level phenomenon, e.g. “everyone having an equal right to exist and...not having to worry about having the necessities that we need to live...a long life, a happy life.” Similarly, they identified violence as both individual/interpersonal and structural.

Participants identified obstacles to peace in their communities. Some participants said that their community did not feel like a peaceful place and that their community members experienced a lot of fear. One participant talked about the violent police force operating in her community, while another participant based talked about the challenges of continual surveillance from police and border patrol, militarized border patrol check points, and the inability for undocumented people to move freely.

Others were not sure whether their community was a peaceful place. For example, one participant who lives in a suburb shared that while it was not a violent place, he was not sure he would characterize it as peaceful either, and that the state in which he lives experiences a significant amount of political turmoil that impedes peace. Another participant shared that he struggled with the question because of the unresolved historical violence of indigenous genocide in the community where he lives and the absence of reconciliation.

Participants shared that local “pockets of peace” and community-building provided spaces where people could breathe and build peaceful lives together. One participant elaborated: “I think community building is pretty great here and it's continuing to develop as in individuals, as community members, we rely on each other for safety, for peace, to get things done, right, we rely on our neighbors, and I think that's something that [location] is pretty great at being able to rely on each other and really build our safety net that way.”

Participants are deeply engaged in their communities through grassroots and civil society/non-profit efforts. Participants identified a range of causes, social movements, and other organized efforts to engage with their communities politically and civically. Participants said they were involved in grassroots groups through informal/volunteer structures. Some participants were involved in their communities as employees of civil society/non-profit organizations. They were involved in a wide range of issues including immigration reform, justice system reform, harm reduction, education equality, protection of abortion rights. One participant observed how in the face of new crises and challenges, like new laws banning abortion or restricting immigration being passed, young people in her area were the first to step up and had a particular passion and drive in their response to these crises. She highlighted that young people got involved on the front lines of the grassroots response, attending/organizing protests, creating/signing petitions. She said that because young people do not always have tools or information on how to strategically channel their energy and momentum in response to crises.

Participants identified other barriers to engagement including limited time, being registered to vote in their home states and not the states they currently live in, lack of social or economic support (as in for the young

people that one participant works with in his job), and limited resources. To support their leadership or the leadership of young folks like them, the participants identified the need for more accessible educational/training resources particularly thinking strategically about how to engage.

Participants had little working knowledge of the UN or how they could engage with it. Although the participants had heard of the UN, when asked about their prior knowledge and opinion about how well it works or could support their work, the participants did not have much prior knowledge or insights/opinions. They had a broad understanding of the UN as an international body, as the target of climate change efforts (though not effective in this work) and as an arbiter of international law and human rights (which was also seen as ineffective). One participant mentioned UNICEF and had a clearer understanding of that organization’s work and mission, however, the UN was generally seen as a distant and obscure body with unclear roles or responsibilities. Participants had different ideas for how the UN could become more relevant: enforce international law, connect to local/grassroots movements

Many participants did not feel that their nation’s mission to the UN aligned with their interests. One person recalled disappointment with President Biden’s nomination for UN representative – and that overall the US does not generally “align with the idea of an international governing peace-oriented system” and “doesn’t play by the rules and puts people that are not peace-oriented to be their representatives.” Another participant concurred, sharing that American exceptionalism runs counter to the idea of the UN and so the US could not accurately represent public interests at the UN. Another participant expressed that she would like to see the US ratify conventions/agreements such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Participants had no prior knowledge and some confusion around what “youth, peace and security” was and what “YPS agenda” meant.

Participants talked about what they think a US YPS National Action Plan should include: educational justice, climate change action, environmental justice, addressing hunger and passing Child Nutrition Act Reauthorization, police reform or total abolition, justice reform/access to justice, shifting investments away from security towards community development, drug prevention and harm reduction and housing accessibility.

Meaningful versus tokenistic inclusion. The final discussion question of the session asked about different types of inclusion, specifically what felt meaningful versus what felt like tokenism. One participant responded that it was clearly tokenism when a young person was invited to a meeting or into an organization, but then all the decision-making power/authority remained with older people, and/or young voices were not heard as loudly or taken as seriously as older voices.

About the Quaker UN Office: Since 1947, QUNO has worked with diplomats, UN officials and civil society to support a UN that prioritizes peace and prevents violence. QUNO works to expand the number who are committed to learning from grassroots perspectives. Only when its peace initiatives truly respond to community needs, will the UN fulfill its mission as a promoter of lasting peace worldwide.