

SDG 16 Conference

ECOSOC Chamber, UNHQ

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Panel 1: Stocktaking progress on SDG 16: Assessing achievements and challenges

Greetings of peace to all! Thank you to the International Development Law Organization, the Permanent Mission of Italy to the United Nations - New York, and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) for having me.

“Pace, per favore,” the late Pope Francis urged, his voice firm, yet gentle and imploring. It was November 2023, and he was calling for peace in Gaza. In the midst of a bustling hall filled with people, his words resonated deeply with me. Just a day earlier, I had spoken at the IDLO Partnership forum, and I talked about how young people, particularly young women, are at the forefront of peacebuilding. The next morning, I joined the queue for the papal audience, perhaps unknowingly seeking exactly that message. I was searching for renewed affirmation to persevere. At this very moment, while I speak, women, young people, children, and other vulnerable groups are enduring the most severe consequences of violent conflict and insecurity globally— in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar to mention a few. Today, as we gather once more to reflect on SDG 16, I carry that moment with me, an enduring call to remain steadfast in the work for peace, all the more important in this political climate.

Question: As we witness violent conflicts becoming more intense and prolonged, what role can women and young people play in helping to build and sustain peace?

Young people engage in conflict prevention, promote peace during crises, deliver humanitarian aid, and participate in post-conflict reconciliation processes. In our experience in the Philippines, youth involvement is not just about participation in formal peace processes but also about creating new, innovative ways to engage and lead in peacebuilding efforts beyond the formal spaces. Let me share two examples to illustrate this.

First, through the program titled "Youth, Me, and Security: Strengthening Peaceful Leaders for the Philippines," a youth leadership program we implemented in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao which prioritizes economic inclusion, with young women at the forefront. This program, a partnership with the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) is focused on enhancing the leadership skills of youth, developing their financial literacy skills, and providing them with seed funding and technical support to implement the peace projects they designed for their communities. This initiative builds on our network's leadership development programs for peace with young women since 2018.

During the program, one of the participants, Aina from Lanao del Sur, shared that economic empowerment gives individuals control over their lives, the freedom to make decisions, and the ability to contribute to their community's development. She shared a very important point, that when young women are economically empowered, it doesn't just benefit them, it creates a ripple effect throughout the community, strengthening social ties and supporting peacebuilding efforts. Aina's perspective shows that peacebuilding is not just about ending conflict, it's also about creating the conditions for long-term stability, and economic independence particularly to those individuals who are constantly sidelined.

The program also showcases how young people are bringing innovative solutions to peacebuilding challenges. The 2025 Bangsamoro Parliament election is set to happen in October this year, and young women-led initiatives such FësaVOTE in Maguindanao del Sur combine voter education with entrepreneurship training, equipping Non-Moro Indigenous Peoples (NMIP) youth with both civic and economic skills. The Special Geographic Area (SGA) and Maguindanao del Norte integrate Islamic perspectives on voting and support young people's voter registration, and these initiatives underline the importance of cultural and religious contexts in promoting democratic participation. To sustain these initiatives, it's crucial to ensure flexible and equitable funding, and to compensate young leaders for their expertise. Supporting their work isn't just about funding projects, it's an investment for a peaceful future.

The second example is the innovative use of social media by young women that I collaborated with in my PhD project in conceptualising "Digital Peacebuilding". Peacebuilding is often seen as something that takes place in formal spaces, around negotiation tables, during peace talks, or within political institutions. However, today's digital landscape, particularly platforms like TikTok and Facebook, is opening up new and potentially powerful avenues for youth to participate in, and shape peacebuilding efforts. This is not meant to be interpreted as an uncritical celebration of the platforms as a tool for peace, but these are efforts that we can't also just dismiss as unserious or inconsequential.

Young women are using social media to make political issues relatable and drive youth engagement. One TikTok, for example, combines a morning routine and outfit check with an explainer on how BARMM elections differ from national polls, urging peers to vote. They also use these platforms to advance diverse peace agendas: Lumad youth advocate for land rights and recognition, Muslim youth counter anti-Islamic rhetoric, and Christian youth promote peace education and interfaith dialogue. These identity-driven efforts reveal the emotional and relational labor behind peacebuilding, rooted in everyday acts of solidarity and self-expression. Far from being a bubble, social media can serve as a bridge, amplifying marginalized voices and enabling forms of peacebuilding often ignored by traditional approaches.

However, we must also recognize its limitations. Platforms like Facebook and TikTok, with their algorithmic biases, can distort visibility and reinforce inequalities, shaping who gets seen and

what gets amplified, thus we need to be critical and ensure that it doesn't just replicate the same exclusions it aims to address. By examining how young women use these platforms for peacebuilding, we can uncover often-overlooked practices and identify ways to foster more inclusive digital spaces for peace.

Young people are shaping peace not only within political institutions but also in everyday, relational spaces, both online and offline. Their creativity, resilience, and ability to turn political issues into personal narratives are key to building sustainable and inclusive peace. Moving forward, we must embrace these new forms of participation and support the voices of those shaping peace.

Follow-up: How can we better integrate the voices of young people and harness their energy, creativity and activism to promote peace and sustainable development?

We need to listen to young people, support them, and create the platforms they need to lead. It's essential to ask them what peace means to them, and to work alongside them as true partners in shaping it. As Amaliah, the founder of a youth-led organization, shared with me when I asked her what peace means to her, she said:

Peace does not simply mean the absence of war. If you go to the transitory shelters and see people struggling to find food, that's not peace to me. I can only consider [our city] peaceful if the internally displaced people (IDPs) and those from Ground Zero can return and rebuild their homes. Because, imagine—why would you give us a sports complex when what we need is housing?

To better integrate the voices of young people in promoting peace and sustainable development, we need to amplify their voices. Despite limited resources, youth have led impactful grassroots peacebuilding initiatives. Yet, youth-led platforms remain underfunded and overlooked. Investing in them will enable young people to not just participate in but continue to lead peacebuilding efforts.

Investing in and supporting young women is particularly critical. Programs like the "Youth, Me, and Security" that we implemented in BARMM show that socio-economic empowerment for young women in conflict contexts can help address the root causes of violence and foster peace. We must ensure that young women have the resources, opportunities, and platforms to engage in peace processes. Their voices are vital to creating lasting peace.

We must continue to create opportunities for democratic engagement, especially for youth, whose contributions to reducing violence and rebuilding communities are important. Supporting youth's participation in elections and decision-making allows them to shape the future they will inherit. At the same time, investing in education, leadership training, economic literacy, and intergenerational collaboration equips young people with tools, mentorship, and support to strengthen their initiatives and create new opportunities. This enhances their capacity to contribute meaningfully to peace and development.

We also need to recognize and support young people's use of digital platforms in culturally grounded ways. Institutionalized peacebuilding efforts should move beyond Western-centric models by amplifying marginalized voices and valuing micro-level, everyday acts of peace rooted in justice, care, kinship, and solidarity. This includes providing resources, visibility, and safe online spaces for these youth leaders to thrive.

In places like Mindanao, where conflict has left deep scars, young people, especially young women, are continually leading peace efforts. They understand their communities better than anyone, and by investing in them economically, socially, and politically we create the foundation for sustainable peace. Young people are not just participants; they are leaders and experts in shaping the future we all aspire for here. To integrate their voices, we must listen, invest, and partner with them.