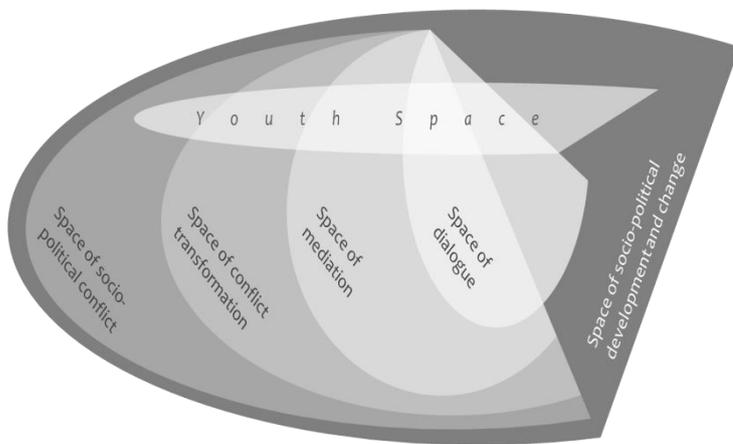MIR MUBASHIR & IRENA GRIZELJ

The YOUTH SPACE
of Dialogue and Mediation[1]

"Age considers; youth ventures." [RABINDRANATH TAGORE]

PROLOGUE

Throughout human history, young people have been pioneering activism and nonviolent movements towards socio–political change. In recent times, markedly since the 'fourth wave democracy' uprisings in the Arab world, the international peacebuilding field has been putting much due emphasis on the role of youth as crucial peace agents. A (much due) United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on *Youth, Peace and Security* was recently adopted, urging greater representation by young men and women in the prevention and resolution of violent conflict.

Young people[2] – individuals, organisations and networks – *constructively* involve in socio–political development and change through activism, volunteerism, student unions, youth wings of political parties, and community development, to name a few. This paints the picture of the *youth space* – the multi–dimensional space that young people create, shape and sustain.[3] Is there, within this space, the youth space of dialogue and mediation – the space of young people transforming conflicts with a dialogic and mediative art?

....

[2] For the purpose of this paper, 'young people' will roughly consider those in the age range of 18–35, covering their biographical phases of 'youth' (15–24) and 'young adulthood' (25–44). This range is slightly higher than that of UNSRC 2250 (18–29), however, it was our observation that 'youth' is felt and expressed in different ways across cultures, which is important to consider.

[3] This however does not indicate that there are no 'non–youth' dynamics. Indeed, older people (35+) do contribute to the youth space.

We endeavoured searching for and exploring this space. We did so, not by taking a mediator or a dialogue facilitator hat and trying to see how it fits on those who *we think* are youth. Rather, we looked at the spectrum of the peacebuilding efforts of the whole of society and explored what in this context is considered and felt as the youth space of dialogue and mediation. In the following, we share the key insights from our exploration.

CATALOGUE

Our key insights are clustered in the following according to the four initial hypotheses of our exploration.

Young people´s dialogue and mediation efforts are less recognised and reported because we usually fail to understand them as such

Peacebuilding efforts of young people are usually well–recognised, celebrated and supported. The dialogic and mediative aspects of these efforts however do not get the deserved leverage. There are two main reasons for this:

:: Not adequately recognising youth potential or benefitting from it

In hierarchical societies and systems that see age as proportional to capacity and quality, it is not unusual that young people´s dialogue and mediation efforts have a hard time getting through. They are seen as immature, inexperienced, not ready, and too emotional or emotionless (depending on the context) by the older generation. Their offers to mediate or to facilitate dialogue are therefore largely dismissed. While this is a demotivating factor, young people tend to be persistent in creating alternative avenues to contribute. Conversely, young people themselves are often unaware that their peacebuilding efforts are mediative and dialogic in nature. This is often instinctual, or learned from observation and experience.

Recent years have seen a growing demand of youth inclusion and participation in national dialogues, especially in light of the youth–driven uprisings in the Arab world. The experience so far has been mixed – not included (Jordan); or included but not given any decision-making power or any substantial role in the implementation phase (Tunisia, Yemen, Bahrain). Young people do get more traction in community level dialogue and they can be influential, albeit informally. One reason for this discrepancy between formal and informal levels of dialogue can be attributed to how we usually shape our

'inclusion paradigm'. Often, it gets too focused on quantity and not quality, or even a 'good' quantity does not necessarily end up guaranteeing quality. What often gets lost in the process is a conscious effort to *benefit from* youth approaches to dialogue. Furthermore, we usually get so hyped up about formal processes that we lose sight of the systemic connection between informal and formal processes. In many cases worldwide, young people contribute substantially to such informal processes. Last but not least, initiatives by national and international organisations tend to jump into bolstering youth participation by 'empowering' them, often as per 'a prescription'. Despite how sincere and well–intentioned such initiatives might be, they often fail to recognise that young people *already have* power, and that needs to be nurtured and supported. Sometimes, however, young people themselves are unaware of their potential, which is an argument to create the space for self–discovery. Another interesting aspect of power is how in the young–old relationship power dynamics are often contentious – older people do not want to 'lose power' to younger people, and younger people strive to 'get hold of the same power' as older people. The latter, if it does not happen, may prove to be 'self–disempowering' and shroud the true potential of youth.

:: Having a constricted view of mediation and dialogue

In the peacebuilding field, the predominant analytical lens for mediation is heavily skewed towards international mediation in inter–state conflicts. Mediation is seen as a problem–solving tool, and a 'facilitated negotiation by an outsider–neutral third party', i.e. 'the mediator' (usually a charismatic global figure or a supra–national organisation). Since the late 1990s, this analytical lens has been upgrading with the emergent concept of 'insider mediation', which is basically a *re–discovery* of the fact that mediation is an age–old tool that has been used by 'wise men and women' such as traditional and religious actors. More recently, framings of 'everyday' peace(building) / diplomacy and a 'whole of society' approach to peacebuilding are encouraging a more realistic, nuanced and holistic understanding of how in our complex socio-political space, the constructive space of conflict transformation coexists with the space (violent) conflict.

Within this, we see the *space of mediation*, which is characterised by efforts of *transforming tense, violent or broken relationships* between or within communities and societal groups, by facilitating the flow of communication, addressing the motivation and attitude behind violent behaviour, and renewing social contracts, to *enact* mutual interests of sustaining nonviolent and constructive relations. These efforts are expended in different capacities by a range of people with diverse backgrounds, experiences and skills. Most importantly, these efforts are not tied to a functional (mediator) role, but rather based on emotion derived from the deep connection to the issues and relationships in the conflict. They can be elders, community leaders, religious leaders, ex–combatants, students, politicians, businesspersons, etc. They come in all shapes and forms with regard to their gender, sexual orienta-tion and age. This means young people as well, and this is a consideration that usually escapes our analytical lens for mediation. For dialogue, our analytical lens tends to be less skewed, but nonetheless inadequately analysed.[4]

In some of the stories we listened to during our exploration, we could take away that young people have the acumen to *identify the need for dialogue or mediation* in the conflict context and they contribute in the best of their capacity to address that need. They venture to *create the atmosphere and stimulate people* to get into a process. In certain contexts, young people are in a more advantageous position to *confront deep-rooted attitude* in a reflective manner (for example that of 'otherness' and enemy) for promoting empathy. They strive to *build confidence and trust* among conflict actors and *facilitate collaborative problem–solving*. All these *inspire and rejuvenate* the older generation/ conflict actors to think and do differently and fill in the dialogue or mediation process. More often than not, however, the formalisation of such a process eventually makes people oblivious to the informal process that led to it. In other cases, highly visible formal processes or informal processes led by older people and involving mainly older people shroud informal processes pioneered by young people. In formal peace processes, not seeing young people at the 'table' however does not necessarily invalidate their connection to and influence on the processes. In Myanmar, for example, young people convene community voice to feed into state–level and provide technical support for formal peace structures (government, political parties, and ethnic armed groups/organisations).

A flicker in the darkness

The violent armed conflict between Ukrainian military and pro–Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine continues to cost lives and displace many thousands. In a city close to the contact line, people suffer from the pain and trauma of war and of losing their home and loved ones. They see their life as dark and hopeless. *AM*[5], a young woman has seen her childhood home destroyed, her parents living in misery. She has taken up the challenge of bringing back light of hope to her hometown. She knows it´s a daunting task, and it´ll take time.

AM invites her community to informal community gatherings where she tries in the best of her ability to offer a warm and cosy atmosphere with some sweets and coffee (which, in these times of war and agony, is literally and figuratively luxurious and comforting). She invites peacebuilders from around the globe (either physically or via skype)—who have the experience of a traumatic past (and present)—to share their story of struggling for peace and

. . . .

[4] What is more readily analysed and understood is the form of dialogue and negotiation that young leaders and collectives have with state actors regarding representation in governance and policymaking. This is however a slightly different scope from what we focused on in this exploration, viz. mediation and dialogue in contexts of (violent) socio–political conflict. On a related note, in the 'Global North', young people pursue professional qualification to become mediators and dialogue facilitators. The learning and application environment range from peer–mediation in school/college or parent–child mediation at family settings to alternative dispute resolution in civil cases.

[5] All names of individuals have been kept as *ITALISED CAPITALS* in this paper for the sake of confidentiality and sensitivity.

reclaiming hope in their communities. This sharing becomes a process of transforming pain and stimulating empathy.

It was not an easy process to begin with. With strong emotions, agony and anger, they have initially struggled to listen to each other, and often could not help blaming, denial and defensive trends. This, however, was something authentic, which they needed to go through, and was essential to figure out their personal and collective issues, limits and capacities for empathy. The space created by *AM* was safe to do that. The dialogue that followed was thus also authentic – a collective process of dealing with the past and imagining a new future. A low–key, informal dialogue process, *AM*´s initiative stands out due to its organic growth and deep, transformative nature, among the plethora of dialogue initiatives in Ukraine.

Behind the scene

Myanmar´s current young generation has grown up in the midst of one of the longest civil wars in the world. Young people are desperate for an end to the violent conflict, however their voices tend to be ignored by elders in the hierarchical social system. The current peace process is a complex affair, given the multitude of positions and interests of the huge number of conflict stakeholders. A youth space in this process is yet to flourish.

A young man *SO* from Myanmar´s Northern Shan State has his own ways of navigating through this system. He has always been interested in observing and understanding problems. He recalls his early attempts as a child at settling disputes on the playground between children fighting for the winning prize in traditional kite matches. Now 34 years young, *SO* is still very visible in his community, creating spaces of youth dialogue and trust–building. He is convinced that young people of this generation are in a position to end the decades of civil war. One of the co–founders and initiators of the Ethnic Youth Conference and a key leader and contact among youth, *SO* is often called upon to support community–level dispute resolution. With both 'natural' qualities for mediation and having built credibility with the community and community leaders over several years, *SO* is able to facilitate 'underground' negotiations within and between the community, armed groups and government leaders. In this regard, *SO* has a skill in identifying the key actors who can effect change, building trust and persuading them to initiate a negotiation process.

Synching beats

Although quite afar from the eastern Ukrainian regions besieged with armed conflict, Dnipropetrovsk suffers from a heavy load of internally displaced people (IDP). While the communities have hosted them have so far generally been empathetic to their fellow countrymen, it has also been putting a strain on the social and economic conditions of the region. Many people say that the undeniable latent conflict may potentially be triggered to become violent. How can this be prevented? How can communities in Dnipropetrovsk become resilient? While a lot of international and local NGOs are trying to create processes of dialogue, they usually fail to attract people. But why? According to *KR*, a young artist–activist, people are not 'ready' for conventional sitting–at–a–table kind of dialogue; not yet. What he therefore tries is *non–verbal* dialogue. He has trained himself in the art of drumming.

The ritual of a Drum Circle is a collective drumming endeavour, which is indigenous to many cultures around the world. The reverberations of drumming pass through body and soul and connect people dialogically on a very different level. It is fun, energetic and spiritual. *KR* invites locals, IDPs, military personnel who otherwise do not interact. More often than not, these people, having gone through the process, start interacting, eventually engaging in verbal dialogue on issues of the community.

Young people have their distinct approaches and methods for dialogue and mediation

The following are broad strokes that shape young people´s approach and method to dialogue and mediation:

> Their efforts come out of their personal experience with conflict. They see violent conflict as an impediment to the socio–economic development required for their successful future. This makes them almost 'impatient' for peace, and they strive to make peace their business.

> They have different realities, experiences, stake in and perspective of conflict than their older generation. In addition, young people today have a broader, more globalised connection to the world, which contributes to their interest to know about other cultures and be more sensitive towards them. This often prompts them to break out of any generational pattern of perceptions about the issues around conflict in their societies, such 'the other', trauma, guilt, religion, coexistence, sexuality, gender roles, etc. They also tend to be generally more sensitive and reactive to injustice and oppression. These are advantageous towards a constructive approach. Indeed, research has shown that young people, esp. those born in post–war times, are generally more open to dialogue and cooperation, compared with the generations that have been directly affected by war and atrocities.

> Certain virtues and characteristics like curiosity, courage, defiance, non–conformity, energy, and passion play out with a different force in this biographical phase called 'youth'. Certain things make more sense to explore, through learning, experimenting, failing and succeeding.

> Personal identity and background – student, social worker, artists, entrepreneur, religious actor, politician, political activist, offspring of a mediator, ex–combatant, former child soldier, etc. – also determine much of the above.

> Innovation and creativity strongly underline young people´s methods for dialogue and mediation, in experimenting with different forms of dialogue, also non-verbal dialogue that builds trust and empathy and stimulates intra-society healing.

> Especially in recent decades, they have greater access, familiarity and innovation with technology, e.g. massive use of social media, which they can employ in their quest for peace.

> They have the pragmatism and acceptance that change happens slowly and in small scope, and being receptive and appreciative of the given scope of action and change (e.g. the small but powerful moments and change happening 'in the room').

> Last but not least, volunteerism is a prominent backdrop for youth dialogue and mediation – doing something from an innate need and not as a pursuit of career or money.

Intergenerational dialogue

In most cases, intergenerational dialogue is initiated by young people, e.g. the Young Facilitators in South Caucasus. The relationships between Abkhazia, Georgia and South Ossetia have been difficult for a long time now. As an effort to transform the very strong apathetic or bitter sentiments that most of the older generation nurture, the Young Facilitators have taken the initiative to foster dialogue and empathy. They are part of an energetic group of people from all three regions who realise that all the negativity, however justified they may be, is not constructive for anyone.

In their 'biographical salon' process, life stories and war memories are shared in intergenerational groups. Older and younger people interact: older participants add their experiences, younger participants (respectfully) challenge dominant narratives and share their views. They engage the whole of society: IDPs, students, ex–combatants, students, journalist, politicians, and lawyers in these dialogue activities – helping their own society to understand the other society, normalise relationships and stimulate forgiveness, by improving communication and building confidence and trust.

Interweaving faith–threads

Dialogue on and between different faiths is a passion of M, a young activist in Myanmar, who is Catholic, but looks Muslim / Hindu due to his descent. In 2012, when violent conflict erupted between Muslim and Buddhist communities, he became scared for his and his family´s life. He realised that it was crucial to address the fear and hatred that was spreading between people from different faiths. For that, M knew he had to reach out to the elders and religious leaders, which proved more difficult than he had imagined. He works closely with his friends in youth religious networks, and uses the connection to request meetings with elders of different faiths. They do not always want to meet, and it takes several attempts before a positive response comes. In these meetings, M tries to get to know them, and asks simple questions about their religion. Then they get curious about his religion, giving him the chance to bring the facets of different religions onto the table. This proved to be a roundabout but fruitful way for many elders to learn about other religions, since they normally did not take the initiative to meet the others.

Creative vehicle of dialogue

The Theatre for Dialogue initiative by a bunch of young enthusiasts was founded as a movement of solidarity with the 2014 Euromaidan protests in Ukraine. They wanted, as an alternative to violence, to have dialogue through creative means of interactive theatre. They wanted to *humanise humanity* by endeavouring to create a culture of dialogue to balance the culture of monologue. The young activists engage in dialogue with communities to analyse their issues using the interactive theatre methodology. An artistic process captures the issues into plays, which form the background of interactive public performances where the actors and spectators are stimulated to engage dialogically to find solutions of their common challenges. The spectator becomes the 'spect–actor'. Different forms of dialogue are created with Forum Theatre, Playback Theatre and Documentary Theatre. Real issues of real people are enacted, empathised with and talked about.

Outreach and transparency

One key approach of *SO* (from Northern Shan State, Myanmar) that sustains his credibility, is remaining open and transparent with the community and everyone he deals with during negotiations. To this end, he additionally utilises social media and news outlets. His pictures from Facebook are used by media outlets and his factual statements, based on observations, are also quoted by the press.

"It's simple: if they don't meet, they won't understand one another"

This is how the Union of Karenni State Youth (UKSY), a network of Karenni (Kayah) youth organisations in Myanmar, rationalised their initiatives of making encounters possible between elder leaders of ethnic armed groups and political parties who rarely met and spoke together. Through first assembling and building trust between different youth organisations, as well as youth wings of the armed groups and political parties, UKSY created a strong and inter–connected youth network. Then they worked to bring together the older generation of leaders. One creative method for dialogue is through the invitation of the different ethnic armed groups and political parties as panellist speakers on thematic workshops. This simultaneously obliged the conflict parties to face one another and listen to one another's perspectives as panellists (which fosters understanding), as well as enabled the community to voice their perspectives and ask questions directly to the leaders. The impact of their initiative is evident in the fact that their state has had significantly reduced violent armed conflict since 2012. "Now, they rarely fight because we brought them together", explains UKSY.

Diapraxis

In Myanmar´s hotbed of communal conflict, young volunteers in Mandalay take up dialogue in action (diapraxis) by creating community projects to engage community members from different faith in solving issues of common community concern, e.g. environment protection. Similarly, in Ukraine, young volunteers engage local people and IDPs in community development activities. This, despite not being verbally dialogic, addresses latent conflict between the groups and fosters an unspoken social contract of solidarity with 'the other'.

Young people have an extended 'sphere of influence' on and access to conflict actors that are different from that of traditional political and societal elites or other peace actors

Although the lack of access to formal levels of dialogue and mediation is a common youth grudge, this very informal relationships they have with conflict actors prove to be advantageous in certain contexts. For example, in a civil war context, the (formal) asymmetric relationship among non–state armed groups, state actors, and traditional political and societal elites is usually a tense one, where maintaining trust is a constant challenge. Young people, in contrast, due to their undefined and informal relationship to all these actors, can allow constructive engagement and dialogue on issues of conflict, even in hierarchical systems. Having said that, in less democratic societies, youth is seen by certain societal elites as a

threat to their status quo. Even in these cases, however, persistent initiatives of constructive engagement and dialogue often proves to be useful. In certain areas of work, such as interfaith dialogue, young people are seen as less threatening.

Young people have their ways of navigating hierarchy and speaking to the right people for the right purpose. In Myanmar and Yemen, for example, young people have played a role in negotiating with armed groups on the human rights situation of communities, including the release of civilians recruited from their communities. One ethnic youth group in Myanmar, as another example, have proven to be much active in synthesising a community voice and approaching armed groups and having dialogue with them on alternatives to the violence and war economy. Young people have also actively negotiated with international corporate firms in case the latter´s activities or policies adversely affect the communities. A youth organisation in Kiev believes in strategic relationship with state actors, and have built rapport with the state and secured their office premises in a ministerial building – to remain transparent and also having open doors for dialogue.

Influencing local governance

In Tunisia, local youth councils enjoy the trust of local government authorities and politicians who, for one, consult the council in matter of local budgets, where the young members are able to negotiate community interests. As of late, a national youth council is in the making… and the hopes are high.

Persistence pays off

In Abkhazia – Georgia – South Ossetia, young people have, through persistent but respectful challenging of age–old stereotypes, been much successful in breaking down walls between 'us and them'. A prime example is how in Abkhazia – a much closed society than Georgia – their 'biographical salon' initiative of intergenerational dialogue on the memories of war is slowly gaining traction. Such developments are allowing them a different kind of access to their communities, elders, and even state actors. This definitely makes further dialogue initiatives easier for young people to do.

Commitment makes credible

Deeply caring about the ongoing conflict, *SO* from Myanmar´s Northern Shan State often travels to communities displaced by the armed conflict to get into dialogue with them and assess the kind of support they need. Over time, this level of personal commitment builds his trust and credibility at the community level. Being active in the community gets him the attention of elders, who then responds to his wish to speak to them about issues of the community. Further, it keeps him well–prepared for negotiating the community´s concerns with state and non–state armed groups.

Young people´s dialogue and mediation efforts can have stronger traction if they receive due recognition, and sustainable support

A great part of recognising young people´s dialogue and mediation efforts rests on becoming aware of their potential and adjusting our analytical lens (discussed in the first hypothesis above). This, in turn, opens up the opportunity to understand their challenges and needs. Certain challenges of young people are generic challenges they have in broader peacebuilding work:

> **Funding**. Difficulty of getting funding for own projects ideas. The logic of funding instruments of donors are yet to catch up with the 'youth trend'.

> **'Work' vs. volunteerism.** For students, it can be a dilemma of balancing volunteerism, working to provide for family or to sustain self, and completing studies.

> **Representation**. Given that young people are increasingly becoming global citizens and in their context being heavily interconnected with a diverse set of actors, it gets difficult for others to assess who they represent and whose interest they serve.

> **Overburdening**. Intense youth efforts in peace work often leave them tired and emotionally strained, often leading to burnout. There are instances where, out of the resulting frustration, young people have decided to go back to 'normal life' – to not be involved in peace work anymore, earning a living or going to study / live abroad.

Overcoming these challenges requires support. Indeed, in many contexts, young people and their organisations and networks get support from their fellow citizens. National organisations are increasingly responding to the need of strengthening youth agency to be agents of peace, either by making them part of the organisation (staff) on ongoing initiatives or as part of special youth–focused/ led programmes and projects. International and regional organisations are similarly adopting 'youth programming' by offering dialogue, mediation and conflict resolution trainings and 'empowerment' projects (on and with youth) all over the world. Search for Common Ground and Peace Direct are very much committed in this regard. Additionally, a number of forums of youth exchange programmes and platforms (e.g. UNOY, PATRIR, INEB, ASEAN Youth Network, CAYN, EU youth ambassadors) convene young people regionally and internationally to promote cross–national learning and exchange. Regional dialogue fora like YaLa–Young Leaders have been an energetic force in cultural diplomacy both online and offline for the Middle East working towards regional peace. Ukrainian youth are active part of Council of Europe´s regional dialogues on security and cooperation, but also country–specific discourse. Myanmar youth are also active in South/Southeast Asian forums on regional politics and peacebuilding.

Sustainable support requires time, patience and commitment. It also requires an approach that embodies non–dependency. The INGO/donor system of projects and trainings keep proving to be unsustainable. The model set by the Young Facilitators process in Abkhazia – Georgia – South Ossetia by Berghof Foundation is worth looking into. It sure took quite a number of years of slow and steady development, with a core group of young people gradually capacitating themselves as dialogue facilitators and mediators. The path was thorny, with challenges from society, local organisations and donors. The commitment of these young people, and their conviction to break out of protracted conflict were well recognised and supported, but for a great part with a mentor role. The Young

Facilitators have been founding NGOs and engaging in their own projects in bilateral or trilateral teams that cut across conflict lines, with little to no foreign or third–party involvement. Eight years down the line, one sees the fruits of this long process on a larger societal canvas – shifted perspectives, willingness to have an honest dialogue with 'the other' and greater level of empathy across the three regions.

EPILOGUE

The peacebuilding field has come a long way. Remarkable achievements have been made over the decades. There is however a certain stagnation in the field with regard to assumptions, terminologies, conceptualising and theorising that define and influence our work. This is especially apparent in how the larger peacebuilding machinery operates worldwide – in its invention of buzzwords, following of 'trends', and in the sheer energy that needs to be spent on convincing that certain kind of peacebuilding work that people are *anyway* doing are actually great and need to be acknowledged and supported. Then with this support as well, we are very fond of training, empowering and building capacities of people – women, religious leaders, business people, rebels and most recently, youth. In doing so, we tend to neglect 'humanising' the issues that these people relate to. We put them into categories, decide what they should be doing for peace, and expect our 'theories of change' to play out fine.

We have been getting better at 'context–specificity', but there is much work to be done in 'person–specificity' and the humanisation of their issues. Humanising is about considering that the persons we are talking to and talking about have their personal and collective stories, which are intricately connected and related to the issues. The examples in this paper illustrate this to some extent. Humanising also means having the openness to understand this complex connection through the language and emotion that go into their narration of and reflection on the issues. This would help us understand their action, inaction and potential in peacebuilding, which is more important than our attribution of them. In an ever–changing world, our attribution, definition and conceptualisation anyway need to be dynamic, whereby we need to keep re–theorising and expanding our theories. This applies to all kinds of categories; this paper being about youth, we argue for approaching our understanding of youth through person–specificity. The hypotheses discussed in this paper along with the few examples, based on an exploration with limited scope, will certainly benefit from further explorations.

In the following, we share a set of reflections / questions as discussion starters for us in the peacebuilding field who are excited about United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 and want to engage with youth.

> We could lose the very essence of youth if our starting point of engagement is youth as just another category. Youth being a biographical phase that every human being will live through, there might be much value in nurturing the youth 'space', not as a special, isolated bubble, but in context of the whole of society.

> The 'inclusion' paradigm can be misleading and frustrating when it does not happen as expected. Instead a 'whole of society' approach of joint learning and action could be a more holistic approach – where everyone is encouraged to contribute with their own strength, passion, skill, vision, etc. regardless of age, gender, ethnicity and religion.

> Another danger with the inclusion logic is representation; broad social categories like 'women' or 'youth' shroud the natural differences that exist within such groups. Inclusion, no matter how well–designed and materialised, would mean exclusion of marginalised members of such social groups.

> Slogans like 'give youth a voice' and 'let youth voice be heard' can be seen as problematic, because they express a certain expectation (or even plea!) from someone. Does this not subtly disregard the very youth agency we so strongly believe in? Provocatively speaking, how about 'make your voice heard' and 'be loud and clear' – addressing young people instead, to mean 'exercise your agency!'?

> Should our idea of 'support' really be about teaching, training and 'empowering' them? How about, instead, mutual learning about what we all do, what we think and what our potential and aspirations are, and thence explore possibilities of *mutual support*?

> As 'preventive' and 'corrective' measures, we engage in intensive work on 'troublemaking' and 'at–risk' youth. It may be much more valuable to nurture the youth space and facilitate a process where these young people can discover their place within this space where they can explore for themselves what their agency is and how they can contribute.

> Stories are powerful. Stories can be inspirational. Let us share more stories of young people who are already constructively exercising their agency and creating change in their contexts.

> Networking and facilitating networking – creating and stimulating systemic connections – can be the best form of support – among youth and within and across societies.

> "Young people are not the future, they are the present" – we adhere to this realisation. Sure, what they explore and learn today will influence how they will contribute to the world of tomorrow. By creating a future–bound trajectory for youth, we may fail to recognise their agency of today and how they do and can contribute today.