Paper Title: The Role of Youth in the Peacebuilding Process in Afghanistan

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THE ROLE OF YOUTH IN THE PEACEBUILDING PROCESS IN AFGHANISTAN

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Summary

- The relationship between youth and peacebuilding is gaining increased attention, particularly in the UN. This is an opportunity to explore what youth can bring to peacebuilding in Afghanistan and benefit from the increased research and policy creation being done around this issue.

- Youth since 2001 have already been strongly involved in the international peacebuilding process (no less because they are the dominant portion of the population). However, they reap few of the benefits of Afghanistan's economy and not enough make it all the way through the education system.

- A survey of 30 youths was conducted for this research; the results revealed that the subjects saw large gaps in what was available to youth but that they still felt the government was moving in the right direction overall. They are especially hungry for critical thinking education and preparation for integrating society while female participants in particular wanted study abroad opportunities.

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"The function of education is to teach one to think intensively, and to think critically. Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education, education must inspire student to dream in order to achieve"— Martin Luther King.[2]

Over the past four decades, Afghanistan has been in a state of perpetual war from the Soviet invasion of 1979 to the civil war of the 1990s, from the rise of Taliban to the 2001 US intervention. There were no breaks from violence. Generations of youth grew and suffered during this period. Many of them were displaced. The Taliban in particular restricted public life. They stripped Afghan youth of the possibility for formal education. Schools were closed. Women and girls were told to stay home. The trauma of the long war itself resulted in Afghan youths paying more psychologically for personal growth during their prime years of development.

The development roadmap kick-started by the 2001 Bonn Conference meant the international community had given itself the responsibility to aid the nascent Afghan Republic in developing new systems for education and job opportunities. Youth economic empowerment, international circles believe, contributes to the success of a post-conflict economy. New skills gained from a formal education will enhance stable job opportunities and lead to a better outcome for the Afghan community as a whole. The ideal situation, going by this line of thinking, is that this process will also create a pipeline for future Afghan leadership, skilled labor, entrepreneurship, and the growth of new profitable sectors.

With the political changes of 2001, youths sometimes took on peacebuilding responsibilities themselves. Far from passively receiving development help, these youths seek to become development actors in their own right. This research will analyze how the youth of Afghanistan interact with peacebuilding and experience its effects. It will also seek to understand the difficulties young people face when engaging society and why promoting socio-economic stability is important for Afghan society but also for the personal development of Afghan youths and future generations.

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2. Martin Luther King Jr was an American spokesperson and leader in the Civil Rights Movement from 1955 until his assassination in 1968.

Methods

This research consists of analysis of existing literature concerning youth policy (especially from the UN and Afghan government) and online surveys of 30 youths— 15 male and 15 female. A questionnaire was developed aimed at young participants from diverse backgrounds including civil society organizations, government services, students and the private sector. Interviewees were selected to ensure equal gender representation, diversity in education level, and diversity in province of residence. Part of the analysis below will be based on the answers given by the 30 participants to the questionnaire.

International Approach to Youth and Peacebuilding

Modern culture categorizes "youths" in contradictory ways— sometimes representing local perceptions of what it means to be young and at other times embracing global ideas of youth, youth socialization, and milestones in the life of a young person. There still is confusion over who counts as "youth." This uncertainty coupled with their unclear role in peacebuilding is identified by Renato Cursi (expert in the role of youth in peacebuilding) as a barrier to the emergence of research around youth or program delivery.[3] Of greater concern is that, according to a 2005 report by youth and conflict expert Yvonne Kemper, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and most conflict-related data completely omit the status of youth between childhood and adulthood from the agenda of international peace development arenas.[4] More alarmingly, she notes they are instead too often targeted as possible troublemakers while efforts by the UN, World Bank, and NGOs to research specific youth concerns and set up programs for them are quite recent and still lack a framework or much in the way of evaluations. Sadly, according to an article posted to UNICEF in 2014[5] and one to the Oxford Research Group in 2016[6], this situation does not seem to have

3. Cursi, Renato. "The Role of Youth in Peace Building." Centro Studi Difesa Civile, March 2017. http://www.pacedifesa. org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/The-role-of-youth-in-peacebuilding_rev26092017-1.pdf . 7

4. Kemper, Yvonne. "Youth in War-to-Peace Transitions: Approaches of International Organizations." Berghof Report 10; Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management. January 2005. https://www.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Papers/Reports/br10e.pdf

5. McLean Hilker, Lyndsay. "Violence, peace and stability : the "youth factor." UNICEF, September 18, 2014. https://www.unicef-irc.org/article/1061-violence-peace-and-stability-the-youth-factor.html

6. Alpaslan, Ozerdem. "The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities." Oxford Research Group, October 26, 2016. https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/blog/the-role-of-youth-in-peacebuilding-challenges-and-opportunities

changed since Kemper published her report in 2005. Both articles note that youth are still being "othered" in discussions around conflict with the UNICEF article in particular noting the rise of cultural portrayals that depict youths as perpetrators of violence and easily manipulated towards malicious ends.

That has not stopped other researchers in the peacebuilding sector from trying to define and understand the role of youth during the last three decades of peacebuilding missions. According to Renato Cursi's 2017 study based on UN missions and research (The Role of Youth in Peace Building), "youth" can be defined through formal, functional, or social- psychological criteria. In other words, it can be based on arbitrary age brackets, by social milestones like achieving voting age, or by criteria based on socio-psychological development, particularly development of social relationships. Cursi demonstrates how all of these categories are affected by periods of conflict and how the social-psychological development of youth in particular can be harmed by the stresses and traumas of conflict situations to the point where becoming a healthy adult is a real challenge. UN experience on the ground was valuable to gaining these insights.

Recently, the UN Security Council mandated a turnaround on the available data on youth. In 2018, a landmark report by independent researcher Graeme Simpson produced an important basis for advocacy for the inclusion of youth in peacebuilding. In this report, Simpson lays down that the simultaneous exposure to conflict-related violence and harassment by the system supposed to protect youth (but instead suspects them of potential malice) produce psychological and physical trauma as well as discouragement from investing in their own future.[7] Social services and institutions that address youth problems are important to create a socially cohesive youth along with internationally supported youth networks and organizations (assuring that certain youths are not marginalized for belonging to the wrong class, ethnicity, gender, or other social category). Furthermore, the potential of youth to contribute to peace can be unlocked through peer-to-peer learning and the experience of direct participation in peacebuilding.[8] It

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7. Simpson, Graeme. "The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth and Peace and Security." United Nations; General Assembly Security Council, March 2, 2018. P 18.   https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/Progress_Study_on_Youth_Peace_Security_A-72-761_S-2018-86_ENGLISH.pdf
8. Ibid. 17.

was found that youth could serve to bridge the different development silos such as security, humanitarian aid, or human rights, for instance. This report led to the UN Secretary-General and his Special Envoys being called upon on June 6th, 2019 to take young people's views into account in security-related discussions. A wide-ranging resolution voted by the UNSC (UNSCR 2419) underlined the contribution young people can make to peace and security if they are actively engaged.[9] Follow up has been slow however, with a new UNSCR as recently as July 2020 requesting that the Secretary-General develop a dedicated guidance on protection of youth and making a broad call to member states to increase youth inclusion in planning and stabilization peacebuilding efforts.[10] None of this will be binding but it does indicate a positive direction in the international conversation on youth going against seeing them as a primarily negative or inert force. It also indicates a possible new shift in direction for Afghanistan and its international donor community.

Afghan Youth Peace-building and Education

The UN-chaired Bonn agreement in December 2001[11] created a new hope for Afghanistan bringing distinct changes to Afghan communities: new institutions, new elections, new strategies and approaches on delivering social services, an internationally legitimate state, but also enhanced education in various parts of the country. Collectively, this had great impact on youth. As part of the Bonn process and UNICEF,[12] Afghanistan also witnessed the return of members of its diaspora as well as a largescale Demobilization, Demilitarization, and Reintegration (DDR) program managed by Japan for young fighters rejoining society. 10 million illiterate young people and adults were also witnessing international aid coming to primary schools accompanied by practical reforms and new facilities. In

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9. "Adopting Resolution 2419 (2018), Security Council Calls for Increasing Role of Youth in Negotiating, Implementing Peace Agreements." United Nations; Peacebuilding. https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/news/adopting-resolution-2419-2018-security-council-calls-increasing-role-youth-negotiating

10. "Security Council Underlines Vital Role of Youth in Building Peace, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2535 (2020)" United Nations; Meetings Coverage and Press Releases. July 14, 2020. https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14251.doc.htm

11. Matsumoto, Yukitoshi. Education for Demilitarizing Youth in Post-Conflict Afghanistan. Graduate School of Asia Pacific Studies, Waseda University, November 1, 2008. P 7. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.2304/rcie.2008.3.1.65 .

12. Ibid. 7.

spite of great achievements, especially for women, DDR expert Yukitoshi Matsumoto was already writing in 2008 that the high expectations the youth had for the new era was being overshadowed by their unimproved military and economic situation.[13]

The World Bank in its 2018 report found that the country did make great strides in improving access and enrollment in primary schools, a 9-fold growth since 2001.[14] However, the enrollment numbers fall dramatically the further youths move up the education ladder. The provinces in particular see a high proportion of out-of-school children, exceeding 50% in 15 out of 34 provinces with girls less likely to attend especially if they come from illiterate families. By 2014, the UN youth category of 15-24 is only around 50% literate, only 13% better among those born to top income families. A 7% drop in literacy for those aged 7-15 years between 2012 and 2014 was considered especially worrisome. The World Bank is concerned about a reduction in government spending on education over the last 5 years (as a proportion of the budget) and that only donor financing kept the sector in a position to deliver basic services.[15] The economic growth between 2010 and 2015, which tripled the government budget, did not translate to more resources for education as education's share fell from 25% in 2010 to 13% in 2015.

On a positive note for peacebuilding, schools and universities in particular have become hotspots for youth seeking to become peacebuilders. Members from the U.S. Institute for Peace noted new curricula for peace studies at a growing number of Afghan universities.[16] Peace activists, often recruited from among students, are increasingly visible throughout the country.

Youth Economic Inclusion

While initial projections for 2020 and beyond may have been optimistic based on growth achieved in 2019 (particularly thanks to agricultural recovery from droughts), the recent pandemic among other issues have

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13. Ibid. 6.
14. Lahire, Nathalie. "Afghanistan: Promoting Education During Times of Increased Fragility." World Bank Group, 2018. P. 9. https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/280721531831663216/afghanistan-promoting-education-during-times-of-increased-fragility
15. Ibid. 10.
16. Lindborg, Nancy and Andrew Wilder. "Opinion: Afghans' Growing Demand for Peace is Key to Ending Decades of War." NPR, November 18, 2020. https://www.npr.org/2019/11/15/779979724/opinion-afghans-growing-demand-for-peace-is-key-to-ending-decades-of-war?t=1599832255336

caused the Asian Development Bank to forecast a -4.5% GDP growth rate.[17] Since Afghanistan has reduced its debt and maintains large foreign exchange reserves, it theoretically laid foundations for pro-growth policies.[18] The economy had been improving since 2017, reaching a 3% GDP growth rate by January 2020.[19]

Despite this, youth remain hard hit by joblessness— the World Bank forecasts that "at best" half of the 400,000 new workers predicted to enter the domestic labor market in 2020 will be absorbed by the economy.[20] Simpson's 2018 report to the UN moreover singles out Afghanistan as a country where economic well-being alone would not protect youth from instability— different inequalities, social immobility, and social exclusion can also destabilize young people's ability to contribute to society and peace.[21] During periods of joblessness, the World Bank recommends that youths join community and youth groups as agents of change to avoid the destabilizing factors mentioned by Simpson— a strategy it sees as especially promising with rural youths who are more likely to be disaffected by the status quo.[22]

In spite of these challenges, youths and young women especially played an important rule on contributing to the recent economic development. The government enabled women to participate in the economy and society to a greater extent.[23] Women entrepreneurs were able to use this to start new businesses and join the workforce in visible numbers.[24]

17. "Economic indicators for Afghanistan." Asian Development Bank, June 2020. https://www.adb.org/countries/afghanistan/economy

18. "Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF) 2017 to 2021." Afghanistan Mission to the UN in New York. https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5b28f4294.pdf

19. "Economic indicators for Afghanistan." Asian Development Bank, June 2020. https://www.adb.org/countries/afghanistan/economy

20. Lenehan, Sara, Shubha Chakravarty, Palwasha Mirbacha, Sarah Elizabeth Haddock, and Maria Virginia Ceretti. "A Qualitative Assessment of Pathways to Youth Inclusion in Afghanistan." World Bank Group, 2020. P. 8. https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/593251587481081246/a-qualitative-assessment-of-pathways-to-youth-inclusion-in-afghanistan

21. Simpson, Graeme. "The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth and Peace and Security." United Nations; General Assembly Security Council, March 2, 2018. P 13. https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/Progress_Study_on_Youth_Peace_Security_A-72-761_S-2018-86_ENGLISH.pdf

22. Lenehan, Sara, Shubha Chakravarty, Palwasha Mirbacha, Sarah Elizabeth Haddock, and Maria Virginia Ceretti. "A Qualitative Assessment of Pathways to Youth Inclusion in Afghanistan." World Bank Group, 2020. P. 15. https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/593251587481081246/a-qualitative-assessment-of-pathways-to-youth-inclusion-in-afghanistan

23. "Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF) 2017 to 2021." Afghanistan Mission to the UN in New York. https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5b28f4294.pdf

24. Ibid. 12.

Local Perceptions on the Inclusion of Youth in the Peacebuilding Process

For this research, 15 male and 15 female interviewees were given a survey to complete. Participant's answered questions regarding their level of satisfaction with status quo and what they have experienced in the Afghan community. The aim is to analyze the remaining challenges the interviewees see on matters pertaining to education, entering society, and achieving peace. The analysis of the survey results are shown below.

During the peacebuilding process, youths tried to act as leaders engaging themselves in decision-making even with regards to the peace negotiations currently taking place with the Taliban. As a matter of fact, Ali Khan Haidary who works at the Administrative Office of President, mentioned: "Afghanistan experienced war and violence for decades. People are now hoping for peace. I am sure that if peace with the Taliban happens, it will not be an achievement only in terms of security but also in terms of the economy, human rights and education".

Not all are as optimistic. Farida Amiri, who is an undergraduate and founder of Peace Friends in Kabul, mentioned the challenges she faced fighting for women's rights under the Taliban and her progression towards becoming a peace leader. In her experience, it is hard to be a woman working for peace in Afghan society. Most of the time, youths working as peace builders are targeted by terror attacks. During her academic years Amiri proved herself through engagement in social activism on education and peace alongside other youths through different programs.

Other than activism, another interviewee (remaining anonymous) stated that education is the only option for youths to reach their goals. She believes that youth can use education as a weapon to fight against poverty and to bring peace. In addition, Shughnia Ramzjo, who recently returned to Afghanistan after completing her bachelor's degree in American University of Central Asia (located in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan), added: "Peace and education are connected to each other. In order to have a sustainable community we should first lead a country with better education". She is very hopeful for the social inclusion of youths, especially compared to what she saw before she left for college.

The different Afghan youths participating in the survey have used different support systems to advance through their years of education and social adhesion. A participant mentioned that the government provided great support by including them in decision making and providing them an international scholarship. Some participants however still believe the government has a way to go when it comes to providing proper educational support for youths living in rural provinces. They also bemoan the education system's lack of critical thinking training and lack of training for how to better engage with society as it currently exists. An interesting reveal was strong female participant support for getting more opportunities to study abroad. Most participants, however, do feel the education system is moving in the right direction when it comes to trying to improve on these issues.

Conclusion

Eighteen years of war brought a huge change on different aspects of youth and education to the country's development. After the fall of the Taliban, the country's youth built an atmosphere among themselves that was conducive to engagement on peacebuilding and peace keeping. With two-thirds of Afghanistan fitting into one youth category or another and with waves joining the jobs market without necessarily having completed an education, involvement in peacebuilding is more crucial than ever. With the new impetus from the UN to create mechanisms for such inclusion, it may be an opportunity for Afghanistan to rise to the occasion.

Involvement with the government and international platforms have been a prominent achievement for youths who are then able to manifest and propose new agendas and new policies on peace and education in the country. Girls and women in particular were given new access to scholarships from outside of Afghanistan and were able to use their new Constitutional rights to enter the public and private sectors in significant numbers. Great strides remain to be taken but with the international community's increasing attention towards youth issues (hopefully without a prejudicial view of youth as troublemakers), there is reason to be optimistic about possible increased research into youth needs and more refined proposals for ensuring their inclusion and well-being in the overall peacebuilding project.

Policy Recommendations

- Continuing to recognize the importance of focusing on education in view of Afghanistan's future development and providing students with scholarships for local universities and abroad.

- Spending more on promoting existing economic opportunities and promoting ways for youth to become active agents in the community so to build and improve their social life and cohesion to the community.

- Create enabling spaces for youth to engage in leadership and decision making roles in national and regional spheres.