

Role of youth in advocating against “weapons of widespread destruction”

by Monalisa Hazarika,
United Nations Youth Champion for Disarmament

Former United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s statement on small arms as the “[real weapons of mass destruction](#)” is no exaggeration and holds true given their perpetual use in both wartime and peacetime situations. While not capable of obliterating entire cities in just one second, they are known to cause, what is referred to as “[individual destruction](#),” given their cross-sectional and mutually reinforcing relation with organ-

ized crime, terrorism, gender inequality, and human rights violations. This posits them at the [intersectional priority](#) of arms control and disarmament, violence prevention, human rights and humanitarian law, public health, economic development, post-conflict reintegration, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), terrorism, and criminality — each perspective advancing a differing lens and solution.







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Why are SALWs concerning?

Small arms and light weapons (SALW) are lethal, easy to use, and difficult to trace when not properly marked and without record-keeping and tracing capacities by national authorities. Given the relative ease of concealment, transport and maintenance, they remain in circulation for long and are available across gray, white, and black markets. Often a politically contentious issue, they are wielded as tools to undergird and maintain power. While a legitimate tool for state security, their illicit and licit production, proliferation and misuse have presented a novel set of issues, with their widespread availability being only

one part of the problem. Besides their licit industrial counterparts, a fraction of these weapons are privately manufactured outside authorized production hubs or are craft-produced with crude materials.

While their [direct effects](#) — facilitating and exacerbating armed conflict, committing serious human rights violations, hindering humanitarian assistance operations, and weakening governance and the rule of law — are stipulated in policy considerations, their cumulative indirect impacts are harder to measure and assess. This includes an array of opportunity costs incurring from overburdening medical systems, privatization of violence, brewing gun

culture, large-scale refugee flow, divestment on economic fronts, and a culture of impunity. In response, they are regulated under differing national norms that modulate their possession, manufacture, transfer, and use and are well within the scope of existing [multilateral treaties, instruments and regional arrangements](#). Further, reporting on their management and tracing is included in the [UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in SALW](#), and specific information on their transfers is specified in [UN Commodity Trade Statistics Database \(COMTRADE\)](#) and [UN Register of Conventional Arms \(UNROCA\)](#) databases to promote transparency and accountability among states.

Why Youth?

SALWs have a [disproportionate impact](#) on young people. They are both victims and perpetrators of armed violence, and through their association with armed groups, who recruit them as human shields and combat roles, they are chronically persecuted, displaced, deprived of access to services, and subjected to the invisible effects on their psychological and social behavior. An [inde-](#)

[pendent progress study](#) on the co-relations between youth, peace, and security conducted in 2018 documented the exclusionary practices of youth as a form of “structural and psychological violence that is deeply rooted in the reciprocal mistrust between young people, their governments, and the multilateral system.” This, according to the report, mani-

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festes across six core areas of political and economic exclusion, education, gender, injustice and human rights, disengagement, and reintegration.

Representing a quarter of the world’s population, we currently have the largest generation of young people in history at around 1.8 billion and are an intersectional priority of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#). As future custodians of our collective vision, youth have the most to lose should the current crisis continue unabated making it imperative to not just “work for” but “with youth.” With little influence over the decision-making process, they have been vocal about their frustrations with current arrangements which merely aim at appeasing their views.



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What can Youth do?

As [advocates and campaigners for peace](#), youth are referred to as the “torchbearers” of the Sustainable Development Goals and are involved at various levels of awareness-building. By engaging them as [“partners for peace,”](#) they help inspire others to exercise their right to freedom of information, opinion, expression, association, and assembly, both on digital platforms and offline. So far, young people have proved their passion for the cause of disarmament by working at the forefront of successful international campaigns to ban landmines, cluster munitions, and nuclear weapons, which prompted the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to acknowledge youth as the [“ultimate force for change”](#) in his *Agenda for Disarmament*.

As changemakers and visionaries, youth, by including disarmament-related considerations in their academic work and

research, can discover ways to engage in scholastic engagements with their peers. This will help them determine challenges and opportunities and devise avenues to meaningfully respond. They could create or join groups, societies, and clubs that explore the intersectionalities of disarmament and arms control with various societal issues and find synergies that they relate to the most. Also, by taking the lead in establishing regional and global networks around disarmament and security issues, they can fill in the gap where such groups do not exist. Understanding where their professional trajectory and work-

stream intersect with disarmament and related international security issues will enable them to visualize and modulate the interlinkages into their interest areas and make multifaceted contributions.

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How to meaningfully engage youth?

In recent years, there has been a pragmatic shift in the understanding of who young people are and their role in policy and decision-making processes. However, much is yet to be done to provide meaningful space for youth to respond across research, policy, and advocacy spheres. Instead of creating separate avenues and ad hoc committees for their participation, arrangements should be made to integrate them into the existing workforce, where they work and



learn alongside experienced professionals. The inclusion of youth perspectives should be treated as more than just an indicator of diversity and as a precursor to the term “human security.” Having a young workforce would not only address power imbalances and geographical biases but could potentially help reshape how traditional security is conceptualized.

Funding and institutional support remain a significant constraint for youth that undermines their involvement, which may manifest as nationality-based restrictions on applications, visa denials, or a lack of full-ride scholarships. Reviewing youth mainstreaming policies requires intentional and concerted efforts from a wide spectrum of actors, which will help understand the barriers to their participation, retention, and advancement. Further, taking stock of the role of youth in preventing SALW violence can help assess the efficacy of existing initiatives and

evaluate gaps for future strategies and plans of action.

There has been a growing recognition by states of the integral role of youth reflected in international resolutions, initiatives, and resources dedicated to promoting the participation of young people in discussions around disarmament, non-proliferation, and arms control, including UNODA’s [#Youth4Disarmament Initiative](#), [Youth 2030 Strategy](#), [Young Women in Non-Proliferation and Disarmament \(YWNPD\) Mentorship Programme](#), and UNSC resolutions [2250](#), [2419](#), and [2535](#), to name a few. Despite the lack of meaningful participation around small arms control at the institutional level, [a report by IANSA](#) listed [#SouthSudanIsWatching](#) (South Sudan), the National Youth Jirga Forum (Afghanistan), and the Youth for Change and Conflict Reduction Program (Colombia) as successful grassroots movements led by youth.

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By recognizing young people as equal stakeholders and injecting greater attention into their training, education, and capacity building, states, civil society, and institutions can move beyond involving youth as mere tokenism. Having a repository of financial and other forms of assistance for youth-led or youth-focused initiatives focused on small arms control and providing space for youth-led interventions in national and international arenas can help tackle the manifested structural inequities and implement transparent and equitable laws to reduce the scourge of arms in our societies and save lives.



The Author: Monalisa Hazarika,
United Nations Youth Champion for Disarmament



How can we meaningfully involve youth in Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) control policy/decision-making processes?

These testimonies were contributed by participants from United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA)'s flagship youth engagement initiatives: the [UN Youth Champions for Disarmament Training Programme](#) and the [Youth Leader Fund for a World Without Nuclear Weapons](#).



**Jutomue Doetein (he/him), 23 from Liberia
UN Youth Champion for Disarmament**

Young people, comprising nearly 1.8 billion individuals globally (United Nations, 2023), are disproportionately affected by the devastating impact of small arms and light weapons (SALW) violence. To meaningfully engage youth in SALW control policy and decision-making processes, we must first recognize their potential as agents of change.

Initiating community-led engagement activities, seminars, and innovative events focused on educating youth about the dangers posed by SALW is crucial. Moreover, fostering intergenerational dialogue ensures that youth per-

spectives are heard and valued in policy discussions. Flexible grants should be provided to empower young leaders to advocate for the effective implementation of government policies.

In conclusion, by involving youth in SALW control policy, we harness their creativity and passion to advocate for safer communities and realize their dreams, free from the threat of armed violence.





**Gigi Sariddichainanta (she/her),
29 from Thailand – participant in the Youth Leader
Fund for a World Without Nuclear Weapons**

Meaningfully involving youth in small arms and light weapons control policy and decision-making processes requires focusing on education, empowerment, and equality.

Firstly, the authorities and civil society should form education networks that bridge the gap in education between privileged and underprivileged groups to ensure that youths from different backgrounds have a common understanding and knowledge of the issue.

Secondly, stakeholders should establish and support youth platforms to empower young people to share perspectives

and contribute their knowledge to the policy process.

Thirdly, all stakeholders must emphasize equality. Youths, regardless of gender or race, must be treated respectfully as adults.

Lastly, using offline and online approaches with youth is important because there is still a digital divide in some communities. Adults should use this opportunity to build capacity in digital literacy for underprivileged groups who have less access to technology.



**Sarah Rohleder (she/her),
20 from Canada – participant in the Youth Leader
Fund for a World Without Nuclear Weapons**

To meaningfully involve youth, it is first vital to provide spaces for their voices to be heard. Education campaigns are essential in getting youth involved and knowledgeable about these topics, but to actually keep them engaged, it is important to have accessible platforms for youth to share their voices and collaborate with each other.

When it comes to involving youth in Small Arms and Light Weapons control policy and

decision-making transparency is also key, to have information widely accessible to youth so that they can know current situations and where to direct their efforts. It is also essential to help youth develop skills to effectively contribute to policy and decision-making processes. Without those skills it can be hard for youth to know what their involvement can look like as well as how to create change and lead other youth to do the same.