

## Leveraging the power of youth for a better peace

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Over the past year, to be a United Nations peacekeeper in the field has meant adopting new levels of flexibility and resilience in the face of evolving challenges. A hard job has become even harder.

As this global pandemic wreaks havoc, tens of thousands of women and men serving in the 12 peacekeeping missions deployed around the world have adapted to the new reality, taking every precaution to stay safe themselves and prevent the spread of the virus, while continuing to support national and local responses and deliver on lifesaving work. Despite the unprecedented challenge of COVID-19, the work of UN peacekeeping continues.

In the context of our various missions, we have witnessed a remarkable partnership between peacekeepers – military, police and civilians – and the local communities they serve, including and, in particular, when it comes to collaboration with the youth.

In many of our host countries, young people are uniting as a positive force to respond to emerging challenges.

As we mark the International Day of UN Peacekeepers on May 29, we are placing our focus on the power of youth. The writing on the wall is clear: for youth to actively contribute to building peace, their needs must be addressed, their participation encouraged, their voices amplified, and their engagement advanced.

UN Peacekeeping has long recognized the value of collaborating with youth as an essential demographic in host countries. In conflict areas, they possess invaluable knowledge about their communities and are often agents of change.

Peacekeepers across our operations help young people acquire skills and tools to participate in decision-making processes by extending training and other forms of support, and by sensitizing authorities on the importance of engaging youth meaningfully and comprehensively.

In places like Cyprus, we are supporting intercommunal cooperation among youth as well as empowering them to implement their own environmental campaigns.

In the Central African Republic and in Mali, our missions have established mechanisms that enable young people to contribute to the development of security strategies. Efforts have also focused on working closely with youth representatives to increase voter turnout in recent elections in both countries.

In South Sudan, the inclusion of youth groups in peace processes has helped strengthen relations between subnational and national actors. The UN peacekeeping mission in the country, UNMISS, works closely with the government and other partners to facilitate peace forums that provide youth with opportunities to participate in political and peace processes.

In the midst of persistent conflict in eastern DRC, the UN mission, MONUSCO, is working with youth vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups, helping to provide them with viable and sustainable alternatives to violence.

At the same time, peacekeepers are addressing disinformation campaigns susceptible to political manipulation, that seek to exploit youth in nefarious ways, and to the detriment of those invested in building a brighter future. This may not be the traditional work of a peacekeeping mission, but we have found that it is an investment that pays for itself many times over.

This progress simply could not be achieved without a majority of our extraordinary workforce: young UN peacekeepers. They inject energy and enthusiasm into their work. They innovate, help lift overall performance, and serve as role models to other young people. In fact, promoting the participation of youth, both, as the core of peacekeeping and within the societies in which they serve, is a key aspect of our overall approach.

Our young peacekeepers are inspired to serve under the blue flag for many reasons, and are recruited as civilian personnel from our UN's careers website or join our ranks as uniformed personnel through their own national armed forces or police forces. Some want new experiences and life lessons, while others are motivated by the potential they see in the UN to help promote peace and security.

Peacekeeping is made up of these remarkable young people. People like Nanah Kamara from Sierra Leone – a country that once hosted one of the world’s largest peacekeeping missions – who serves in South Sudan as a UN Police officer and contributes to strengthening rule of law by training national police officers. Or 28-year-old Lieutenant Eric Manzi, a Rwandan mechanized troop officer, who helps maintain armored vehicles in the Central African Republic, so that peacekeepers can safely conduct protection of civilians patrols. Both peacekeepers saw the effects of horrific conflict in their own countries and decided to focus their careers on supporting other nations on the long and sometimes arduous road to peace.

Our young civilian personnel, including those serving as United Nations Volunteers, also make remarkable contributions in many areas, and ultimately play a pivotal role in integrating the Youth, Peace and Security agenda into the work of peace operations.

Kamara and Manzi and tens of thousands of other peacekeepers – the young and the not-so-young – work tirelessly in some of the world’s most difficult places to build a better and more durable peace. They deserve our appreciation and they need our unwavering support. It is simply the least we can do.

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