

# 3 key ingredients for building a peaceful generation

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Young people protesting in Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo, Egypt. The Arab Spring has galvanized efforts around the world to empower youth — but their role in decision-making remains limited. Photo by: [Rowan El Shimi](#) / CC BY-NC-SA

Millions of young people affected by conflict around the world are trying to make their voices heard. Whether they do so peacefully depends on their inclusion in communities' social and political development.

“If you are left out, you are filled with anger,” says Vivian Onano, a 24-year-old Kenyan activist. “The only way you can have your voice heard is by creating unrest.”

The [United Nations Population Fund](#) estimates that there are [1.8 billion young people](#) aged 10 to 24 globally; developing this generation into peace builders is widely seen as imperative. Yet young people working on peace initiatives often lack support identifying and challenging the issues holding them back.

Onano, a youth representative at [U.N. Women](#) Global Civil Society Advisory Group, among several other development organizations, points to three key problems restricting young people's development: access to education, gender inequality and unemployment.

## Universal access to education is fundamental for peace

Onano credits her ability to speak out to her mother, who pushed her to be educated, and the scholarships that funded her schooling.

“When you're educated, you are informed, empowered and you feel liberated,” she says. “You have the freedom to equally participate in the same global arena.”

Not only should all young people — male and female — be granted equal access to education, Onano says, but nations also need to provide curricula relevant to today's global markets. Without this, she warns, rates of youth

unemployment could “lead to unrest that could destabilize the whole world.”

Ben Hewitt, campaigns director at [A World At School](#), agrees the development community should focus on helping young people to build their own peaceful futures. His organization supports 500 youth ambassadors in 85 countries, of which Onano is one. He says their [Up For School campaign](#) is more of a civil-rights movement than development program.

“It’s about young people demanding their rights,” he says, adding that development agencies should provide training and mentoring to existing in-country youth networks, rather than dictate change.

## **Breaking the culture of gender inequality**

Alaa Murabit is one of countless young people driving peace initiatives around the globe. Murabit founded [Voice of Libyan Women](#) at age 21, following the country’s civil war that began in early 2011. The nonprofit focuses on women’s rights and now has teams of volunteers in 35 cities across Libya that train school children about women’s political participation and economic empowerment. The body has also implemented national media campaigns on violence against women.

For Murabit, breaking the culture of gender inequality among young people is key to forging peaceful futures.

“When you look at the negation of women’s rights in countries, ones that lean more towards conflict actually have much less civil liberties and personal laws for women,” she argues. “When people say in the Middle East we never saw the [Islamic State group] coming, I find it ironic because you tend to be able to see transition in a country based on the way it treats women.”

Murabit says education is less of a problem in Libya, where the literacy rate among women is more than 90 percent. But women do not make themselves heard in peace-building initiatives, she suggests.

“The conversation will be dominated by men, because the environment isn’t safe,” Murabit says. “Peace building and conflict resolution is predominantly led by men. The solution is often how to better regulate our military, or how to increase surveillance. Very few women are in those conversations because the space hasn’t been created. We need young women to show up.”

Development professionals can help achieve this, says Murabit, by identifying local partners and creating platforms to amplify young women’s voices. She’s urging organizations to target the grass roots and top-level policymakers simultaneously, and advises implementing organizations to work in partnerships so each plays to their strengths.

## **Steady employment increases the chance for peace**

Bringing together divided groups is an approach used by the NGO [Seeds of Peace](#). Since 1993, it has hosted young Americans, Egyptians, Israelis and Palestinians, among others, at three-week summer camps in the United States. These aim to challenge concepts of the “other” or “enemy” from the age of 14, before children develop views that lead to conflict.

Tal Shavit, Seeds of Peace director of Israeli programs, attended a camp herself when she was 14; she says developing young people’s critical thinking and enabling them to identify what changes they want to make empowers them to engage in future community-building activities.

“When we work with youth on peace building, especially before 18, it’s built on personal experience, meaningful relationships, and giving tools and practical leadership skills,” Shavit suggests. “It gives them the ability when they’re older as well as belief in themselves to do it.”

An important part of training young people in peace building is to allow them to reach their own conclusions,

according to Shavit; aid workers should stress, in their work, that there's no right or wrong.

## A conversation in partnership with



Youth Will, a new campaign by Devex and partners, explores the power that youth around the globe hold to change their own futures and those of their peers.

This message was instilled in Seeds of Peace graduate Qasim Aslam. At age 14, he took part in camp discussions that highlighted differences in historical perspectives. Almost 10 years later, he co-founded a charity that asks school children to question how governments tamper with textbooks. [The History Project](#) aims to break down misconceptions that have caused decades of conflict between India and Pakistan by getting pupils to compare how schools teach historical “facts” differently across borders.

“This problem is shaping the way our future generations are learning about our past and influencing how we behave in the present,” says Qasim. “We want kids to start questioning everything they’re taught, that they hear through the media and their parents, then form their own opinion.”

Qasim’s work has been recognized by the [International Youth Foundation](#)’s YouthActionNet initiative. As a [YouthActionNet](#) fellow, he is among 1,100 young social entrepreneurs in 89 countries who have set up social enterprises to improve their communities. About a tenth of these focus on conflict resolution, according to IYF President and CEO William Reese.

Young people will have a better chance at building peaceful futures if they can access employment and grow stable economies, Reese suggests — and most experts would agree, even if the exact relationship between unemployment and radicalization remains a matter of debate. Businesses are part of the solution, Reese says, as corporations have a vested interest to develop opportunities.

“Companies’ prosperity and security, let alone in a broader sense the peace and prosperity of communities they live in, are going to be much more enhanced if they have a talented, capable, willing workforce,” he says.

IYF works with corporate partners including Hilton, Microsoft and Walmart to deliver programs focusing on youth employment skills. He advises other organizations to use public-private partnerships to address problems among disaffected youths.

“If young people are not employed, not civically engaged and dropping out disillusioned and hopeless,” he warns, “you’ve got a time bomb.”

**Want to learn more? Check out the [Youth Will website](#) and tweet [#YouthWill](#).**