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Remarks

delivered by

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at the

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“Strengthening Conflict Resilience Through Prevention and Youth
Engagement”**

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**Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,**

Let me begin by thanking the Embassy of the Kingdom of Denmark and the Institute for Peace and Security Studies of Addis Ababa University for organizing this important and timely event.

Context

The world today is home to the largest generation of young people in history. This is particularly true in Africa, where the population of the youth is growing, and expected to have doubled by 2055. Currently, the continent's young population comprises of a conservative total estimate of 720 million; with about 60% of the population being under the age of 25. These trends underline the importance and urgency of shifting our focus towards youth protection, inclusion and engagement in peace, security and development processes.

There are numerous examples around the continent which illustrate the negative impact of marginalization and exclusion of this segment of the population with regards to peace, security and development.

It is therefore imperative that young people have a seat at the table. Moreover, they are needed at the table, especially since the generations that will ultimately be most affected by the implementation of today's guiding policy frameworks – specifically the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the AU's Agenda 2063 – are theirs.

Moreover, we must also do a lot more in conflict prevention, and specifically ensuring that conflict early warning mechanisms result in early preventative action. Early action must include thoughtful and creative inclusion of youth in peace processes, as well as in initiatives to sustain peace. We must emphasize the primacy of political solutions to emerging or on-going conflicts. The Secretary-General and Chairperson of the AU Commission have emphasized the primacy of political solutions, in addressing peace and security challenges, and this continues to be our focus within the context of the Joint AU-UN Framework for Enhanced Partnership in Peace and Security.

Policies and Progress

At the policy level, a lot of progress has been made over the past few years. In 2015, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 2250, which recognized the important and positive role of youth in maintaining and promoting peace and security. Last year, resolution 2419 followed, which called for an increased role for youth in negotiating and implementing peace agreements.

The African Union has likewise built a strong normative foundation, including adoption of the African Youth Charter, and has taken commendable steps towards realization of its aspirations to protect, engage and empower young people.

Recommendations

Despite the development and adoption of the frameworks, policies and tools necessary to make a change, we are still at the very beginning of this journey. What

is needed now is collective and decisive action. Allow me to outline a few priorities in this regard:

1. Changing the Narrative

Young people continue to be seen either as victims or as potential perpetrators of violence. Such narratives are limiting and further contribute to the marginalization of youth. In fact, there is neither a clear correlation between large youth populations and violence, nor reliable evidence that youth unemployment and violence are correlated.

In March 2018, as requested in UNSCR 2250, an independent progress study titled ‘The Missing Peace’ was completed and presented to the UN Security Council. The study examines the positive roles of youth in peace and security, and proposes ways to support the agency, leadership and ownership of young people, and facilitate their equal and full participation. In November 2018, the AU Peace and Security Council requested the AU Commission to conduct a continental study on the role and contributions of youth to peace and security in Africa. The study, which was supported by my Office, is now in an advanced draft stage and was recently presented to the AUPSC.

Both studies found that young people are at the forefront of positive innovation and proactively contribute to peace, security and development. The findings underlined that predominant narratives on youth are false, and that it is necessary to shift the focus to engaging young people as partners for peace, recognizing their positive contributions in peace, security and development, and supporting their efforts, including through increased advocacy and reliable funding.

2. Fostering Participation

Young people strive for full and meaningful participation, and they want to play an active role in shaping their own future and changing the continent for the better. However, as they continue to be excluded from dialogue and decision-making processes and are facing the consequences of bad governance in their daily lives, they often begin to mistrust the established systems, withdraw from formal politics and create alternative avenues for participation. In some cases, they become vulnerable, and potentially recruited into militias or violent extremist groups.

We need to address this issue with a two-pronged strategy: On one hand, it is urgently necessary to facilitate the participation of young people in formal decision-making and include them in established structures. At the recent open session on youth, peace and security, the AU Youth Envoy, Ms. Aya Chebbi, for example, encouraged the AUPSC to invite youth briefers to all relevant discussions to ensure the mainstreaming of youth perspectives in the deliberations of the Council.

On the other hand, we need to recognize that young people use different tools to exchange information, organize movements and facilitate decision-making. Ensuring safe spaces for civil society engagement, for youth movements and grassroots initiatives, and for online activism is therefore crucial.

On this note, it is also important to recognize that there is a gap regarding the use of online spaces and cybertechnology. Governments lag behind when it comes to using modern tools to meaningfully engage their political constituency. Violent groups, which can be highly sophisticated, have realized this fact, and increasingly use digital technology to their advantage, including for recruitment purposes. This is an

issue that must be met with sound and holistic strategies – rather than repressive efforts such as blocking of social media and internet shutdowns. Young people would make excellent partners in finding solutions to this problem.

3. Ensuring Protection

Youth continue to find themselves among the most vulnerable groups and continue to be disproportionately affected by violent conflict. According to the study ‘The Missing Peace’, “an estimated 408 million youth (aged 15-29) resided in settings affected by armed conflict or organized violence” worldwide in 2016. Further, “estimates of direct conflict deaths in 2015 suggest[ed] that more than 90 per cent of all casualties involved young males”. In addition, young people, particularly young women, face discrimination and violations of their human rights, fall victim to sexual and gender-based violence, human trafficking and harmful practices, and continue to be victimized, traumatized and excluded.

We cannot, therefore, expect young people to positively and meaningfully contribute to peace, security and development processes, if we cannot uphold their rights and protect them from all forms of discrimination, exploitation and violence. Protection needs to be a priority.

4. Stepping up Prevention

Despite being treated with increasing importance, youth, peace and security remains a marginal issue that is not being appropriately mainstreamed in conflict prevention and management. Our strategies, programmes and mechanisms, must, as a standard practice, take youth into account.

For example, we need to prioritize the promotion of good governance, which is one of the most common claims made by African youth in discussions on conflict prevention, and in doing so, should strive to understand what good governance means to young people, what their priorities are and how to cater to their needs. Young people should be encouraged to register to vote and to stand as candidates when reaching the respective legal ages to do so, and to participate in electoral processes in a meaningful manner, not just as voters and candidates, but also as election officials, election observers and media representatives and thus safeguard the integrity of elections.

In times of rising levels of intolerance and hate, it is further necessary to invest in sensitization, peace education, civic education, and other measures to instill a culture of peace in our societies, and we need to engage young people as early as possible, especially by partnering with educational institutions. This is particularly true in contexts where we see heightened tensions in the name of preserving ethnic, religious or cultural identities.

I recently got to meet with the Ethiopian ‘Mothers for Peace’ initiatives, which is working within the tertiary education space in Ethiopia to address grievances between groups as early as possible. This is a wonderful example of conflict prevention in practice, and we need to encourage and support similar initiatives across the continent.

5. Building Partnerships

One of my priorities as the Secretary-General’s Special Representative to the African Union and Head of UNOAU is to continue and further advance the

partnership between the African Union and the United Nations, as well as with RECs/RMs, in youth, peace and security. However, in order to make sustained and irreversible progress, it is necessary for a variety of actors to form meaningful partnerships at all levels and across all sectors, including with academia, media and the private sector. This must include working more effectively at both national and sub-national levels, including with grassroots organizations, to ensure a social fabric in which youth are fully and equally represented.

I thank you for your kind attention and look forward to our discussions today.
