

Do you know your rights



Voices of Youth
www.unicef.org/voy/

<http://www.unicef.org/voy/>

Young people in conflict and recovery

14 November 2005 / New York – In preparation for a meeting about the role of young people in conflict that is taking place in Geneva from 28-30 November, *Voices of Youth* (VOY) opened an online discussion space to solicit the views of young people themselves. There have been 45 messages posted on the topic since September. Comments from the discussion formed the core of the October 2005 *Voices of Youth* newsletter; this summary presents comments gathered since then.

Accepting the problem

Young people acknowledge that conflict can have a horrific effect on children and adolescents, and they stress the importance of coming to grips with the aftermath of war before starting recovery and rebuilding efforts:

“One of the things that young people can do to rebuild society is to recognise that the state of that society is in need of rebuilding. We often err by not first identifying the problem. We must understand that change is a process, not a sudden occurrence; the youth must be patient but also persistent, and apply pressure on their governments to rebuild their societies.” *girl, 19, South Africa*

Embracing their potential

Young people are firm in their conviction that they have a role to play in rebuilding after conflict. They feel that focusing on issues such as HIV/AIDS, which can be exacerbated in conflict situations, is an important and often-overlooked aspect of rebuilding – one to which they can contribute.

“I think young people can help to fight AIDS [after conflicts] by acting as voices for AIDS workers in society. This can be done by encouraging them to educate their families on true facts about AIDS. We can also act as voluntary workers in the societies we live in and we can encourage and be willing to educate our people about AIDS. In societies where it is considered a taboo to talk about AIDS I think we can team up with other organisations at work. This might sound difficult and I know it is, but the motto is ‘never give up.’” *girl, 16, Uganda*

They also express guarded optimism about their potential to contribute at the policy level:

“Though we as youths do not hold any political seats in power, such as councils, boards etc., ... we have our freedom of speech and voice.... So we can share with political parties in the government and express any ideas that come to mind on how we could rebuild a society after a violent conflict.... There's always a way to help: 1) contacting local officials (county council, senators, representatives, state government officials) thru phone or correspondence, 2) attending county council meetings (or if you can't attend, ask for the minutes from the meeting).” *girl, >21, USA*

Perhaps most importantly, they focus on the strength of conviction that comes with being young and the will they have to make a real change in society:

“What defines our youth is our strength! [We have] strength in learning, and a willingness to cause a change – that is why we are called the leaders of the morrow. We should be a [force for] change, not making the same mistake as our predecessors! LET'S ARISE WITH THE VIGOUR IN US, and pioneer the change our society needs – physically, mentally, and socially!” *girl, >21, Nigeria*

You can read more of the *Voices of Youth* discussions on the *Voices of Youth* discussion forums at: <http://www.unicef.org/voy/discussions/>. We request you to please use available channels to publicise this e-space with your staff, partner organizations and especially youth organizations and networks in your country and region.

Promoting education

Young people know that knowledge is a powerful tool, and are working to educate their peers with the aim of empowering them to take action.

“Education – this should be the first vital investment a particular unique nation could ever establish in any child, irrespective of his or her parental situation. If formally routed in, a child would go a long way. [Education can] build a valuable youth with respect for life and other human values and with high appreciation for prestige and pride.” *boy, 19, Nigeria*

Young people also stress the importance of cross-cultural understanding.

“A lot of stereotypes are created surrounding wars – the governments of some nations create stereotypes and since the majority of the population has no information about the nation their country is fighting against, they begin to believe these stereotypes. That is why I think that education about cultures around the world and different traditions should be enforced.” *girl, 19, USA*

Concentrating on healing

In their discussions, young people come back time and again to the importance of the healing process after society experiences violent conflict.

“We know so much damage happens during violent conflict. In the region, people die, and this creates great trauma. So, what can we do to help rebuild society after a violent conflict? We can work it out if we just let grow in ourselves the motivation to heal this trauma. We can do something good to help other friends feel better, like play and tell our own fun stories. Together we can rebuild the mental health of our own selves in order to build up the region again. Our participation is so necessary to take care of our best interests. Finally, we have to save what we have built together.” *girl, 16, Indonesia*

“Children are part of society, thus they experience the same horrific reality of war as an adult would. The only difference is the coping mechanism within each individual, and children, due to their intellectual, physical and psychological vulnerability, are less capable of handling death and destruction. Even though children tend to cope much better in post-war countries, they are forever changed by what they witnessed or forcibly participated in (as a child soldier). Now, after a war, a child's perspective depends on what counselling facility is available to her/him and the importance placed in their protection and rehabilitation.” *girl, >21, Canada*

Being realistic but hopeful

Young people are almost painfully aware of the economic, political and social limitations they face when it comes to post-conflict rehabilitation and rebuilding. Many express frustration at their inability to influence the power structures in their countries. But they remain hopeful nonetheless, and advocate persistence in the face of adversity.

“I think realism in this case means knowing your limits. Most of us don't. [Too many times we suggest answers that are too] simple, like 'it makes me sick, we should change something, we are the future'. It's really not like that; we can't necessarily move mountains just talking 2 each other. BUT, negative people won't do anything good either. If we just give up, then I don't know what this world will become, and I really don't wanna think about it. Maybe we can't move those mountains; maybe we won't change all horrible lives and broken hearts. But it's worth trying. It's a way of showing that we care. You can't possibly believe it's hopeless – by losing hope we make it hopeless.” *girl, Romania*