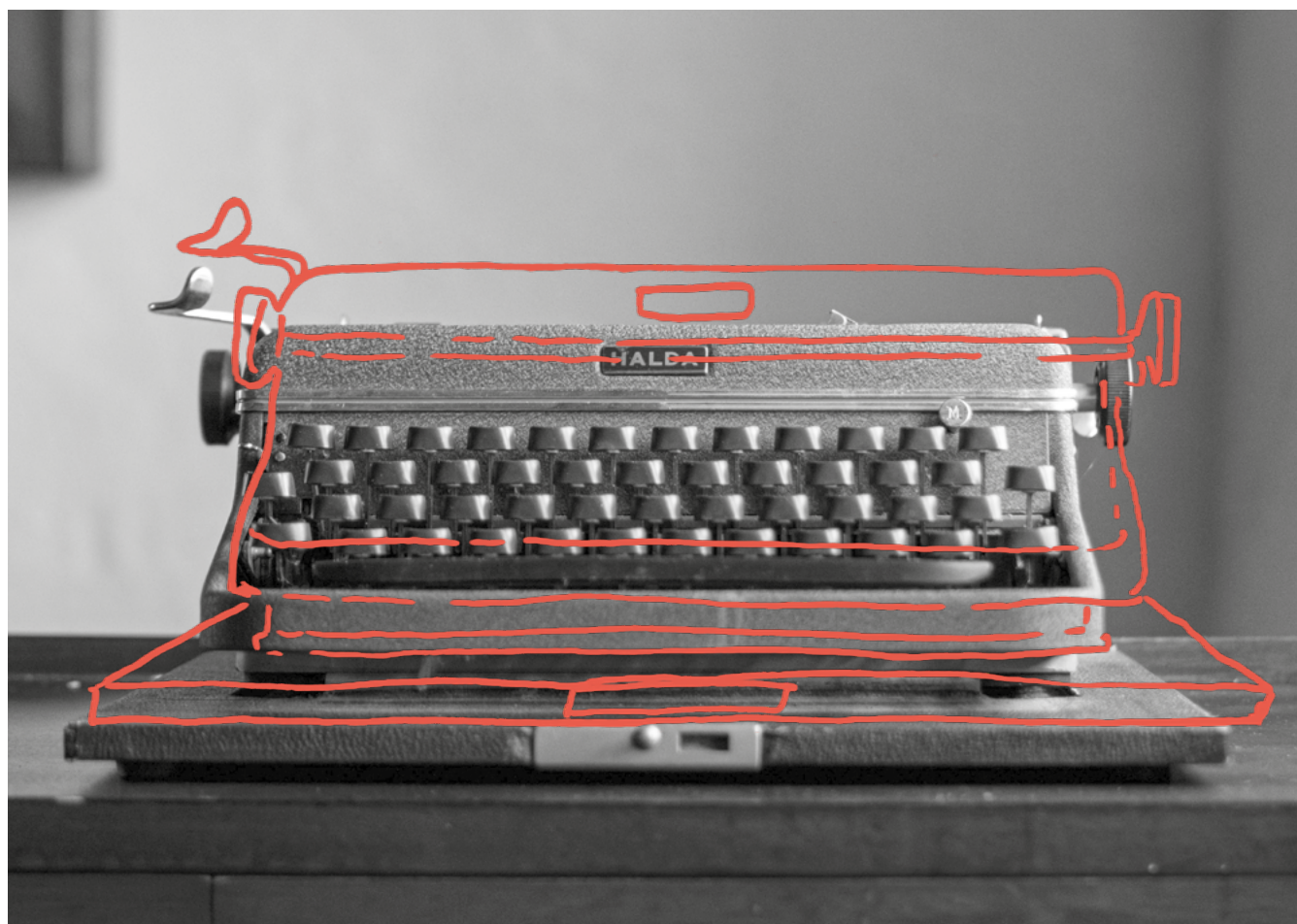


Talking about intergenerational leadership in an era of urgency is not enough

Saumya Aggarwal



The Halda typewriter. This typewriter was Dag Hammarskjöld's travel companion, on which he wrote part of his journal *Waymarks* during his many trips. Nowadays a relic from the past, the typewriter becomes a symbol of tradition and the 'old ways' of doing things – a practice Saumya Aggarwal wants to modernise. By rewriting the narrative created over time, she calls for a shift from the current top-down approaches to more inclusive, grassroots engagement – where the UN actively engages with and supports youth-led initiatives to address complex global challenges.

Saumya Aggarwal is a social entrepreneur, peacebuilder and an international trainer. She co-founded Youth for Peace International (YfPI) to build capacities in youth, introduce community development and do advocacy work in the field. She previously provided online training at Asia-Pacific Level to the United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY). Other experience includes facilitating global and local training in volatile zones like Jammu and Kashmir and North-Eastern India and in the policy arena where she brought peace components to the Gujarat youth policy. Her work with YfPI and UNOY are the Global Focal Points for Sustainable Development Goal 16 within the United Nations Major Group for Children and Youth, the formal General Assembly mandate spaces for young people to engage meaningfully in the UN. Saumya Aggarwal is a Generation Change Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace.

Envisioning the world as a beautiful place to live where people are empathetic, inclusive and accept differences is what prompted me to co-found Youth for Peace International to build a peaceful world of empowered individuals and sustainable societies. My journey in the youth peacebuilding space started in 2015 when pursuing undergraduate studies and wanting to use arts for community change and I gradually started doing live paintings to raise awareness. In the same year the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 was adopted and we were actively engaging in its implementation at national level which was my first introduction to the UN system.¹

In the beginning, the idea of engaging with the UN and working with them was very fascinating and I was moved by the power the UN has to create global impact. Our passion to work with the UN entities started with leading Twitter (now the social media platform X) campaigns, we attended global meetings, joined coalitions and began using the language of the UN to document our work.

Slowly our efforts started getting recognised and the Youth for Peace International (YfPI) team was invited to present our work at the UN High-Level Political Forum 2019 in New York. I remember writing my first speech with the community experience and recommendations from young people for the Forum and the feedback that I received was that 'you should speak the UN language to be taken seriously or to even be heard and considered to be able to speak at the High-Level Political Forum'. I remember reaching out to different individuals to help me write my speech and it took me days to muggle up those words.

This advice made me feel incompetent and that my experience was invalid, but I started taking this feedback

seriously. Gradually with these statements, my words were not mine anymore. I felt that I had no agency to own my narrative and what I wanted to present. In this process there came a realisation that the UN leadership has to be sensitive about the grassroots realities and make itself informed about these processes.

If we talk about the work required at the country level, then a lot needs to be done, especially in the current situation and to address some of the urgent crises. Here in India, I have experienced a somewhat complacent attitude, and I haven't seen the pathbreaking shifts I have hoped for. Do the UN leaders even know that I have tried to reach out to them or their subordinates so many times in the last years? Is just saying 'we are available, reachable and inclusive' enough? When it doesn't materialise into anything concrete?

As a developing country, youth in India are facing multiple complex problems of access to education, unemployment and climate change, to name a few. But the biggest and most ignored is the degrading social fabric of society. This is the worst for any society, but specifically for India due to its diversity which is being manipulated for political motives such as using media and narratives to increase the gap. The discrimination, hate speech and violence have become so common that opposing these as a pacifist is an invitation to be labelled as anti-national.

It's high time that UN Country Resident Coordinators along with a diversity of young people should reflect on the purpose of the UN's establishment and what are the needs and challenges of the people. One strategy can be to engage with diverse young people on a regular basis and engage them in the processes. The questions should be: Are we listening? Are we making space for young people to share their experiences without any fear?

In India, we say 'Mera Bharat Mahan' (My India is great) because the country provides education, livelihoods, food and much more to meet the necessities. As a young person, what one further expects from UN leaders is to respond when we reach out and take a strong stand on some of the issues that we are facing and address it in partnership.

For instance, the United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY) in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is coordinating a thematic working group on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) in the Asia Pacific. This is a space for youth-led and civil society organisations as well as the different UN entities to meet and learn about each other's work, find avenues for partnership and support each other with resources.

It's interesting to note that work, similar to that being done by the UN at the national level, is being done by different civil society organisations inside and outside India with smaller budgets. One example is the work done by Youth for Peace International that launched a free national mental health support helpline during the COVID-19 pandemic with less than US\$ 5000 and reached out to half a million people in India and also provided one-on-one therapy support. This is a showcase of how youth-led organisations and civil society institutions can create support in communities with limited resources and power. Working in the youth sector, our leadership is visible, committed and we can fearlessly express visions of development impacts that is different from mainstream changes that the Indian government is currently working on.

In my opinion, United Nations leaders need to move from service delivery to thought leadership and systems change considering it to be a multilateral intergovernmental organisation working with a budget of US\$ 3.59 billion in India. Different communities are being displaced, experiencing conflict and their lives are under threat. Is it the role of a UN entity to provide sanitary napkins to 18 000 people? Perhaps this is not the kind of impact

we expect.² One can almost argue that the UN often is too cautious and over-focusing on risk assessment which is reframing the way that the system is responding and taking action with a strong stand in the situation of urgency and crisis. It is my experience that this approach is causing distrust between the UN and the people, especially the youth.

In India, cases of community violence are mostly affecting young people, especially in places like Jammu, Kashmir and Manipur, and the communities need support from the UN to create some pressure on the government to address it. If Bhagat Singh and Mahatma Gandhi would have been too cautious then we wouldn't have been independent by now.^{3,4} Even though I argue for a faster pace of change, it is important to incorporate the 'Do No Harm Approach' as well as proactively managing risks.

Moving to the global level, I am observing that there is a top-down approach towards the adoption of different resolutions and policies. There are some impressive policies at global level with the efforts of UN leadership, but there is little awareness about those efforts at national level and thinking about the implementation feels like a far-fetched idea.

It has been eight years since the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2250, the milestone to have global consensus around the positive and key role that young people play in building and sustaining peace.^{5,6} This was followed with the adoption of Resolution 2419 and 2535.^{7,8} In as many years, we haven't seen best practices by the UN in any country. Thus far out of 193 Member States, there are no model examples, with only a few with designed national action plans, but that's not enough.

In India we are seeing that Youth, Peace and Security implementation is not even the priority for the UN Country Team. Young people in India started a national coalition on Youth, Peace and Security in 2020 to implement the YPS agenda and engage different stakeholders,

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but we haven’t seen any support from the UN.⁹ It’s a coalition of young peacebuilders, civil society and youth led organisations, and academic institutions who have come together to feed their responses in the upcoming national youth policy and raise awareness through campaigns. We translated the documents into local languages to make it more accessible, led advocacy missions in ten different states and met relevant stakeholders, fundraised and supported the youth-led peacebuilding work.

It’s high time that the UN starts doing the heavy lifting at the national level and shift the focus to the strategic work being done in countries rather than having decisions being made at the global level. We are hoping that the UN will partner with us and bring visibility and credibility to the advocacy efforts of the Indian Coalition on YPS (ICYPS) as this requires a joint effort. Additionally, UN leadership should start using the language of YPS agenda in the meetings with the policymakers, government officials and relevant institutions like Niti Ayog.¹⁰ In the last eight years, there has been only one organised half-day consultation on UNSC Resolution 2250. Is that enough? We need to start the conversation even though it does not seem to be a priority for the government, but it is one of the priorities for the youth in India.

Our experience is going to be historical on many fronts during 2024, especially because it will be the biggest global election year in history. Namely, 76 countries representing half the world’s population – 4 billion people – will go to the polls to vote in presidential, legislative, and local elections. At the time of writing India will have national elections and the youth will be the biggest population cohort to vote, but unfortunately their voices are missing.

The youth movement created a ‘Youth Agenda 2024’ which includes the needs, challenges and aspirations of youth from India and this can be further used by political parties, ministries and different other stakeholders.¹¹ In this particular document, young people have clearly expressed that they don’t feel heard and safe spaces to

engage in dialogues are missing. They believe that they are just on the receiving end and are being engaged in the development of the country just as a resource from which the country can benefit.

It was demotivating to see that the UN had to back-step in engaging with us as they don’t want to come out as political. That wasn’t something that we as young people expected. As the world is growing younger and the challenges around the world are different, it requires a proactive approach towards addressing the issues and for which we need to have young people in the leadership of the UN. Young peoples’ role should not be limited to three minutes to address the world leaders during the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Youth Forum, the United Nations High Level Political Forum or the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Summit.¹²

We need intergenerational partnership and space to engage meaningfully in decision making. Young people need to be seated with them and communication has to happen on the table without the titles. We should not be seen just as beneficiaries or people who can roll out the projects on ground. It’s time to engage us in the designing, implementation and evaluation of the projects and advocacy with the governmental institutions. In this context, it is not enough to rely on a strong knitted network of a handful of civil society organisations who ‘speak their language’ or are existing partners. Without real engagement, UN leadership will not be able to learn about new approaches and changing dynamics in the community.

As young people we are being ignored by the UN leadership when we need them more than ever. We want them to share their power with us as we are more than ready to engage and participate – meaningfully, actively, socially and politically. I would like to invite the UN leadership on all levels to collaborate with us to ensure the wellbeing and rights of young people are being addressed, especially in countries where we are experiencing shrinking civic spaces. ■

Endnotes

- ¹ United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2250 (2015), Adopted by the Security Council at its 7573rd meeting, 9 December 2015, (New York, United Nations Security Council, 2015), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/814032?ln=en&v=pdf>.
- ² United Nations, 'United Nations in India, Annual Report 2022', (New Delhi, United Nations, 2022), <https://india.un.org/en/247832-united-nations-india-annual-report-2022#:~:text=The%20UN%20India%20Annual%20Report,towards%20the%20COVID%2D19%20response>.
- ³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhagat_Singh.
- ⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mahatma-Gandhi>.
- ⁵ See note 1.
- ⁶ At the time of writing in April 2024.
- ⁷ United Nations Security Council, S/res/2419(2018), '(New York, United Nations Security Council, 2018).
- ⁸ United Nations Security Council, S/res/2535(2020), 'Youth, Peace and Security', (New York, United Nations, 2020).
- ⁹ https://www.instagram.com/yps_india/.
- ¹⁰ <https://www.niti.gov.in>.
- ¹¹ Youth of India, 'Youth Agenda 2024', (Samvada, Bangalore, 2024), <https://youthagenda.net/>.
- ¹² United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Youth Forum, <https://www.unccd.int/events/other/ecosoc-youth-forum>; the United Nations High Level Political Forum, <https://hlpf.un.org>; Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Summit, <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/>.