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'What we give up to get where we're going': compromise in the institutionalizing of youth peace advocacy

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ABSTRACT

In 2015, the UN Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS), formalizing an agenda for positive youth participation in peace and security. However, youth peace activists have been leading peacebuilding long before this institutional recognition. This article explores the dynamics of how advocates and institutional actors conceptualize and negotiate compromise. To do this, it draws on in-depth interviews with youth and adult YPS advocates, a critical analysis of documents related to the agenda, and extended participant observation. It explores and develops a notion of a *field of youth-oriented peacebuilding*, drawing on Bourdieu. This makes visible a more complex field of struggle, showing how compromise can help explain how youth actively negotiate their participation in formalized agendas and persist in their own peacebuilding ambitions. It argues for a more nuanced understanding of compromise to understand the affordances and limitations of youth agency and institutional agendas.

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Introduction

Youth peace activists and their allies have been building peace and addressing security risks long before any formal institutional recognition. Their leadership and participation in efforts at community, national, regional and international levels have been well documented by scholars and youth practitioners themselves (see among others, Berents, 2018, 2022; Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015; Kwon, 2019; Lee-Koo & Pruitt, 2020; McEvoy-Levy, 2001, 2006; Mollica, 2017; Pruitt, 2020; Ragan-dang, 2020; Simpson, 2018). In December 2015, the UN Security Council unanimously passed resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS), marking what has been described as a 'groundbreaking' (Simpson, 2018) shift in institutional recognition of youth capacity and potential. Resolution 2250 recognizes institutionally for the first time 'the important and positive contribution of youth in efforts for the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security' (UNSC, 2015). The resolution was in part the result of years of careful campaigning by civil society, in particular youth-led organizations themselves, to achieve recognition and inclusion of youth in peace and security (Berents, 2022). Since 2015 the UNSC has passed two further YPS resolutions, and regional bodies, national governments and CSOs have adopted and implemented the agenda (see Berents & Mollica, 2022; Leclerc & Roushahbaz, 2021).

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This article explores the idea of ‘compromise’ in advocacy for the YPS agenda. The concept of compromise emerged from the interviews and conversations of this research and prompted a re-evaluation of how I was understanding ‘inclusion’ in my own work as well as in the literature I rely on. A key moment was with a young man from South Asia, who has been working in the youth peacebuilding space since before the passing of the first YPS resolution. In our conversation, he described his negotiation of institutional agendas and his own goals by saying ‘it is what we give up to get where we’re going’. The explicit articulation of loss-for-gain, or compromise, struck me as something not usually accounted for in scholarly engagements with youth inclusion and participation.

When prompted, this youth peacebuilder further reflected on the ways in which his personal goals, as well as those of the various youth-led organizations he was involved in, were never fully realized when engaging in institutional structures and processes. In this conversation, such encounters were articulated as disappointment – a frustration that the institution/s were perceived to have let young people down, while at the same time, those young people make constant compromises to access the much vaunted ‘seat at the table’ they are promised. After speaking with this young man, I increasingly noticed discussions and articulations of compromise in my interview discussions, as well as in side-chat (i.e. in the Zoom meeting text ‘chat’ function) at formal online events.

However, it is not only the youth peacebuilders who demonstrate struggles that can be articulated as compromise. While youth can face obstacles due to people in positions of authority or power not seeing youth as worthy of inclusion, people in these positions can also be sympathetic to the broad agenda, but also simply be daunted or frustrated by the increasing demands inclusive peacebuilding approaches make. An example of this comes from a high-level public event on YPS where a senior UN bureaucrat noted that including youth added one more thing that he and his team had to consider in their work. It used to be more straightforward, he felt, and now he must ‘deal with women and deal with youth’ (fieldnotes). It was clear from the broader conversation that this bureaucrat wasn’t innately hostile to the inclusion of youth (or women for that matter), but rather that what he saw as his core work required modification, or even compromise, to ensure he fulfilled the expanding mandate of inclusion. These accounts highlight the ways in which there are structural, embedded hesitations in taking youth inclusion seriously, and how compromise is experienced by different actors working on forwarding an inclusive agenda.

In institutionalizing youth inclusion through the YPS agenda the UNSC has positioned itself at the centre of long-ongoing debates about the role of youth in peace and security responses. For youth who have had their work and voice routinely dismissed and ignored, the presence of an institutional agenda provides opportunities, but it can also foreclose possibilities. For institutions, the inclusion of youth enables new activities but also requires challenging long-established norms of youth exclusion (see Berents, 2022). While compromise is invoked to explain and describe institutionalizing processes of advocacy efforts, this article argues that closer attention to how compromise is understood and experienced by both youth peacebuilders and representatives of institutions can reveal a more complex field of struggle for those working on youth-inclusive peacebuilding. This article offers an understanding of compromise in two main ways: as a mechanism for navigating individual engagement in institutional processes, and as a logic of decision-making in efforts to influence the nature of the policy agenda itself. It sees manifestations of compromise expressed by all actors – both youth and non-youth – although focuses predominantly on those expressed by youth actors as they have been more understudied to date. This critical attention to the ways in which compromise manifests has implications beyond the youth-focused space, in offering new ways of thinking about how advocates ‘come to’ institutions.

The article proceeds in five parts. It first provides details on the project undertaken from 2019 to 2023 with youth and adults engaged in work related to the YPS agenda which informs this article.¹ It then outlines a conception of a ‘field of youth-oriented peacebuilding’, drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu to denaturalize what is at stake when young people ‘come to’ participate in the institution. Having established this field as a site of struggle and contestation over who is allowed to participate and in what ways, the third section turns to develop the idea of compromise as a nuanced way of understanding young people as agential in their engagements with institutionalizing process. Here I argue that compromise is a more useful term than either ‘inclusion’ or ‘co-optation’ when thinking about these interactions. The second half of the paper explores what compromise looks like for youth peacebuilders and representatives of institutions. The fourth section explores the idea of compromise in the individual decisions made by youth peacebuilders to participate in institutional spaces. The fifth section uses the idea of compromise to unpack the contestations over what issues constitute the YPS agenda itself, and the direction of the field of youth-oriented peacebuilding more broadly. Together these five sections reveal the complex navigations of youth and adult actors in global peace governance to better understand the affordances and limitations of youth agency and institutional agendas.

‘Critical friendship’: methodology and approach of the research

Over five years (2019–2023), using ethnographically informed methods, I have spent extended time with advocates, bureaucrats, and policymakers – both youth and non-youth – who are working on developing, implementing, and making use of the YPS agenda. The global COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible to travel to places to engage with YPS work in-person, however, it did also result in the move of many key advocacy meetings, events, and discussions to virtual spaces, which I was invited into, and from there, I was able to undertake 48 virtual in-depth interviews with key stakeholders. This is supported by a critical analysis of UN and civil society documents related to the agenda; a virtual survey completed by 78 youth peacebuilders from 27 countries; and over 250 hours of participant observation at virtual advocacy meetings, high-level forums and public events. This large volume of material has meant I have developed a nuanced understanding of the landscape of advocacy and policymaking on the YPS agenda at the global level, as well as regional and local implications. In this article, I draw primarily on interviews for quotes and examples, however, it is the participant observation and other analysis that have enabled important contextualization of the material presented here.

Youth, in this project are understood broadly to be those aged between 18 and 29, in line with the definition in Resolution 2250 (2015). However, such an age range is a practical guide for the reader who seeks parameters. In practice, I asked every participant to share their age and whether they identify as a youth. This reflexive opportunity opened new insights for the project on the ambiguity and flexibility of the label of ‘youth’ and aligns with understandings of youth as a social-constructed category (Özerdem and Podder, 2015), not merely an age-bound one. The average age of those who self-identified as youth was 26.8.

I have found the idea of ‘feminist critical friendship’ a valuable one in articulating my relationships with those who are engaged in YPS advocacy work (Chappell & Mackay, 2021; Holvikivi, 2019). Chappell and Mackay (2021) argue the value of feminist critical friendship as a methodological position is that

it offers researchers a mid-position between uncompromising critique about oppressive (gendered and/or patriarchal) structures and monolithic (neoliberal) logics on the one hand, and overly positive, actor-centric, voluntaristic accounts of gender change on the other.

Such an approach pays attention to ‘the position of feminist actors in institutional settings, the pendulum movement back and forward between small wins and losses, and the cumulative effect of these over time’ (Chappell & Mackay, 2021) and is a ‘dialogical relationship’ (Holvikivi, 2019, p. 18). Although not all those who participated in this work are feminists, and although my primary object of analysis is not gender, such an approach resonates with my work on youth also, acknowledging my normative stake in the aims of the agenda, my ‘entangled’ position as both a semi-detached observer of, and simultaneously, an acknowledged member of the community of those working for more youth-inclusive peace governance.

A field of youth-oriented peacebuilding

Stories, such as those of the young South Asian man or the UN bureaucrat shared in the introduction, reveal the tensions experienced by actors who are working on the YPS agenda. However, they are also revealing about the landscape in which these negotiations are taking place. Work on global governance and civil society participation often takes as given the institution as the natural site of power and decision-making. Here I want to instead ask what is at stake when young people ‘come to’ the institution and participate as well as unpack the ways in which the expansion of who is included by the institution changes the landscape itself.

To do this, I turn to the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, in particular his work on fields. Bourdieu’s work, put in conversation with more conventional accounts of global governance, helps produce a more sociologically informed analysis. Such an account requires recognition that the object of study – in this case so called ‘youth-inclusive peace governance’ – is not pre-existing, and instead that part of the research process is to construct the research object through talking to actors and to avoid assumptions (Bourdieu et al., 1991). In international relations, this Bourdieusian approach has been adopted by scholars working in the ‘practice turn’ or with practice theories (among others see: Adler-Nissen, 2013; Bigo, 2011; Bueger & Gadinger, 2014; Leander, 2011); however, the concept of the field has not received as much coherent attention.²

In straightforward terms, Bourdieu understands a field as a social space that is formed by relationships between the different positions social actors take and the positions they are able to take (dispositions, in Bourdieu’s terms). Bourdieu offers the term ‘capital/s’ to describe the attributes that actors in a field hold – what classic IR theory has often reduced to framings of ‘power’. Thinking about the capitals held by certain actors enables an understanding of what is seen as valuable to the field (Bourdieu, 1986). Privileges, power, knowledge, resources, relationships, can all be understood as forms of social and symbolic capital in a given field (Bourdieu, 1986). In the case of the youth peacebuilders, these forms of social and symbolic capital may include speaking English, living in a city with access to policymakers, knowing the right way to dress (or even, owning a suit), being able to get visas for travel, known by adults with relatively more social capital in the field that enables access, among many others. None of the positions taken (or able to be taken) by actors are fixed but rather they are relational, the nature of capital is not fixed but rather collectively agreed, and the frontiers of the field are permeable and contested (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 36) As a result, actors in a field will engage in struggles over their relative positions (and their capital). Thus, an idea of ‘a field’ in Bourdieusian terms indicates a particular social space organized by struggles over different capitals, which partially defines the stakes of those

struggles, and which is constituted by actors who hold more power and those who *relatively* hold less.

For global governance, thinking with field theory, enables us to see how organizations like the UN have accumulated social and symbolic capital and thus hold positions of power within a given field (see Gadinger 2023; Bigo et al 2008). However, these positions are constantly challenged, and every new actor who takes a position shifts the relative power relations of all actors. Bigo et al (2007: 8), writing about European security professionals, note that approaching the field as the object of analysis,

allows going beyond the official organization charts ... it also avoids underestimating the professional and/or bureaucratic struggles, power-relations and boarding mechanisms that play an important role in the explanation of what is at stake ...

While Bigo and colleagues are concerned with a different set of actors, their analysis demonstrates the potential to denaturalize the assumed hierarchies and query the constellations and contestations of power within interactions between actors inside and outside of particular governance structures. Such an approach is highly valuable when considering the field of youth-oriented peacebuilding.

I use the term '*youth-oriented peacebuilding field*' deliberately. 'Youth-oriented' allows recognition of actors operating in relation to each other through a common belief in the value of youth participating in peacebuilding practice. However, the contestation over the *nature* of that participation is one key site of tension and 'struggle for power' in Bourdieusian terms. Identifying the field of youth-oriented peacebuilding situates the boundaries of the field to include actors who would argue for youth participation to be 'weak' such as 'youth-consultative peacebuilding' as well as those who want to see a 'stronger' articulation such as 'youth-led peacebuilding'. Such terms also imply different locations of the field's *centre*. In the former, youth are peripheral, and in the latter they are central.

I also consciously do not identify the field as constituted solely by or as the YPS agenda, for two reasons: firstly, because what exactly the YPS agenda *is* is not settled, and secondly, because there are individuals and groups who do not identify as working 'on YPS' who nevertheless have important relationships within the broader field of youth-oriented peacebuilding identified here as the site of struggle and contention. Bourdieu also argues that the boundaries of the field are 'almost always at stake in the struggles within the field'. This is because 'changes within a field are often determined by a redefinition of the frontiers between fields, linked (as cause and effect) to the sudden arrival of new entrants endowed with new power resources' (2004, p. 36). The establishment of a new institutional policy agenda with YPS means the frontiers of the field are newly contested by actors trying to enter the field of youth-oriented peacebuilding or trying to use the new agenda to gain a more dominant position.

Fields are centrally about legitimacy and legitimizing certain actors (and by the same token, also about illegitimacy, and delegitimizing actors, excluding them from participation). In this way, the youth-oriented peacebuilding field is about struggles for youth to take a position that is seen as legitimately within the field at all, in relation to the rules of the game (*nomos*) as written by those who traditionally hold accumulated capital (in this case, the UN and other institutions). Struggles over inclusion are struggles over legitimacy, but the position-taking of youth peacebuilders simultaneously changes the shape of the field itself and the nature of social capital within it. Thus, the field of youth-oriented peacebuilding is the constellation of positions and the struggles between them. It is simultaneously an extremely diverse space and at the same time can be considered coherent via its common practices, beliefs, and entanglements.

Conceptualizing compromise: more than inclusion or co-optation

Much of the literature on civil society participation or engagement with the institutions and practices of global governance is framed around either ideas of ‘inclusion’ or critiques of ‘co-optation’. Scholarship on ‘inclusive peacebuilding’ has proliferated alongside institutional moves to rebrand engagements with local communities as ‘inclusion’. Critical explorations of inclusive peacebuilding highlight the challenges and limits of meaningful inclusion in the context of radically uneven power relations and distinct agendas (see Berents & Mollica, 2022; Donais & McCandless, 2017; Fortna, 2018; Paffenholz & Ross, 2015). The imagined ‘good society’ constituted by women and broader civil society has seen their voices included as ‘an essential supporting component’ in peace processes (Paffenholz & Ross, 2015, p. 15; see also Shepherd 2015). Their inclusion is due, in part, to institutional framings which position ‘their experiences and values in ways that align with the underlying mandates of formal peacebuilding mechanisms’ (Berents & Mollica, 2022, p. 8).

‘Inclusion’ here is a directional term; it implies inclusion *in* something, and a move from outside to inside. When we talk about youth inclusion or youth participation, we are talking about bringing youth *into* an established space with existing norms and practices that may be familiar to those who are endogenous to that space, but require adaption, compromise and rapid learning from the youth who are joining. This raises questions about the value of framing such engagements as ‘inclusion’ unproblematically, and it also echoes existing critiques of the uneven power relations of youth engagement in global peace governance. (see the introduction to this special issue)

Narratives of ‘participation’, ‘inclusion’ and ‘empowerment’ frame youth as subjects in a power relationship dominated by adults and adult-led institutions. Soo Ah Kwon argue that these discourses, underpinned by neoliberal logics of governance, produce youth-as-subjects and constrain the field of possibilities that youth action might take (2019). In Bourdieusian terms, it forces them to adhere to the existing rules of the field, rather than challenging those rules to account for other positions. This form of participation is often critiqued as being tokenistic, with both the literature and youth YPS practitioners during this research describing a ‘tick the box’ form of inclusion so that it can be claimed that youth participated without disrupting existing power relations and the business-as-usual of institutions (see Sukarieh & Tannock, 2018 on YPS; and Tuck and Yang, 2014 on how youth resistance can counter these practices of compliance). Such processes require youth to shape themselves to fit the expectations of institutional processes, arenas, and goals. This is not limited to youth peace advocacy; youth engaged in UN climate negotiations make similar observations (see Thew, Middlemiss and Paavola, 2022). There is also a necessary caution in discourses that call for increasing the participation of youth without specifying what that participation looks like. In the critical childhood studies literature, there have been ongoing debates about the ways in which child participation functions to legitimise institutions as inherently democratic and inclusive (see Holzscheiter et al., 2019; Reynaert et al., 2009); and similar concerns are valid in the youth space. This assumption that ‘the more youth participate, the better’ drives discourses of youth inclusion and requires scrutiny. Adult stakeholders gain significant legitimacy by having youth ‘at the table’, often without scrutiny of what their presence looks like, and what they are or are not ‘allowed’ to do there. This further entrenches the structure of the field *as is*, that perpetuates itself via extracting value from youth who are otherwise excluded.

Given the radically uneven power relations inherent in youth activism in formalized global spaces, the question that emerges is: can we think about youth inclusion as anything other than co-optation? Co-optation is the dominant frame within the literature on CSO-State relations and social movement engagement (Holdo, 2019; Trumpy, 2008). Emphasized in the literature

on CSO-institutional engagement in international studies is the ways in which the agendas of civil society groups move beyond the ‘control’ of CSOs to serve institutional agendas both within peace and conflict scholarship (Jackson, 2018; Mac Ginty, 2011; Randazzo, 2016) and literature on norms and global governance (Cooley and Ron, 2002; Sending, 2015; Stampnitsky, 2023). Much of this work, understandably, focuses on the dynamics of engagement with or within institutions. Instead, from a fields theory perspective, compromise provides a way of analyzing these relationships for two key reasons. Firstly, it moves the focus to the agency of young people, to recognize that they are not just dupes but making strategic choices in these relationships. Secondly, it enables critical reflection on the ways in which the institution must also compromise in the process(es) of committing to the inclusion of youth.

That actors make strategic decisions in global governance processes and advocacy has been well established by the existing literature. This literature has explored how, why and in what ways international organizations ‘open-up’ to non-state actors. Tallberg et al. (2013) have mapped engagements across a large diversity of types of IOs, and this work has expanded to explore the dynamics of civil society and other non-state actors as they encounter and influence global governance mechanisms and processes (including, Dür & Mateo, 2016; Stroup & Wong, 2017; Züm, 2018). Literature on cooperation (Andonova, 2017; Hardt, 2014; Johnson, 2016; Westerwinter et al., 2021) that emphasizes the ways in which actors within and outside find ways of working together to achieve aims. This work is often located at the institutional level. Considering compromise nuances these conversations, enabling discussions of cooperation, or co-optation to reveal the micro-level interactions that actors undertake. It also allows attention to actors who may be missed in existing studies on authority, such as youth, who are often not seen as legitimate actors.

Compromise generates, but is also a response to, more complex dimensions of engagement. A young person choosing to compromise and participate in a formal event, despite their participation being conditional, can generate further exclusionary practices and norms. However, the choice to participate is also the product of a series of decisions made within a context where youth participation cannot be taken for granted and in which that youth has been excluded before. Thus, the analytical focus on compromise in this article is not intended as a totalizing category of analysis but rather to enable a view of the field that is often overlooked or missed. While some might suggest that existing approaches to ideas of ‘inclusion’ might offer sufficient analysis for young people’s participation, this research has shown that simply talking about inclusion – the ‘quality’ of inclusion, the ‘quantity’ of inclusion, the site/s of inclusion and so on – is insufficient to meaningfully understand how and why youth participate and how and why institutions invite them in. Struggles at the ‘frontier’ of the field (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 36) show that these relationships are more complicated and ambivalent than just being included or exploited. Compromise enables a view of the sites of struggle that shape the field of youth-oriented peacebuilding and the norms that pervade it.³

Choosing to compromise

Why might youth participate if they know that participation requires this compromise? Simply put, often, because the centre which holds the power also holds the resources to enable their work. ‘Buying in’ to the institutionalization of the agenda grants access to status, resources, and legitimacy for their work. In Bourdieusian terms, the institution holds the capital that actors in the field have agreed is of value, and in taking a position in the field which seeks that capital, even one which recognizes the complexities inherent, actors privilege institutionalization as the ‘capital’ and

delegitimise other forms of capital /activity. If youth want to be perceived as legitimate actors within the field, they need to play by the rules of the field as it is currently structured, at least in part.

However, youth are often co-located in contexts where their work is deeply grounded in the wellbeing of their communities (often articulated as the young person ‘coming from’ a particular community – which is unidirectional in orientation, and oriented towards the assumed centre). In these situations, compromises enable them to serve those communities while participating in the requirements of the institutional processes. Wevyn Muganda, a feminist activist from Kenya, who at the time we spoke was a Cora Weiss Peacebuilding Fellow at GNWP and had briefed the UNSC and UNGA. She is also deeply involved in the work of youth-inclusive peace at the national level via the establishment of a Kenyan Coalition on YPS as well as local engagement through ISIRIKA, the youth-led organization she founded. Muganda, in this reflection, considers her participation and how she managed in the elite global spaces:

At the global space, I think it’s tokenism. I am so privileged to have spoken at the Security Council and other UN meetings and other global forums, but there are many instances where I feel like I am there to tick the box as a young person, but also as a Black young woman. It’s just many layers to it. For me, how I go about it is that, regardless of whether you invite me to the room or not to tick the box, I will still speak my truth. I’ll still call you out. I’ll still hold you accountable.

At the end of the day, and this something that I try to always be aware of and mindful of So that when I speak, I know that I’m not speaking for myself, I’m speaking for many other young people who cannot get that opportunity. Which means that I need to speak that truth and not what is expected of me.

This tension between holding obligation to community and the potential benefits enabled by institutional access is something that Muganda constantly weighs up in her engagements. She goes on to explicitly articulate her struggle:

Of course, it comes with a lot of anxiety about, should I tentatively [mess] up this one time and lose an opportunity to influence decisions in the future, many more that will come up, or should I keep my silence and stay respectable so that I can keep getting this? At what point, the compromise [pause] . . . I think everyone has to compromise. That’s my biggest lesson from getting into the global space, is that it’s all compromised, but I think there has to be a balance. Where can you not compromise and where can you compromise? (interview, 28-year-old⁴ young woman, Kenya, April 2022)

Muganda demonstrates the ways in which youth often simultaneously work across ‘levels’ and in multiple ways. Their inclusion in formal institutional spaces is enabled by the capital they hold in the field of youth-oriented peacebuilding by virtue of their grounded peace advocacy, recognized by institutional actors. Conversely, yet simultaneously, young people’s participation in these elite spaces gives them legitimacy in their own contexts too. However, their positions in the field are fraught and laden with considerations of the politics of their involvement and when compromise might be necessary.

While there are many youth, like Muganda, who articulates her compromises as navigating obligation to different sites in the field, other youth can, just like adults, be motivated by individual greed or prestige. Many youth activists I spoke to recognized and described behaviour of others that was seen as selfish or for personal gain, rather than for a more collective sense of gain. Illustratively, Ma’in Alshamayleh from Jordan, who is the co-founder of the MENA YPS Coalition, noted the ways in which youth can participate in and reinforce the elitism of the agenda:

So, back to the point that the YPS agenda brought the people to the table, but how is the process and how meaningful is the participation of the people that sit at that table? . . . This is also related to the

selecting the people who are sitting at the table. If they are qualified or not, if they are representing all the people or not, if they are a playing role or not? Because now the young people they are always ... You can find a lot of people ... they are [just] looking for their interests. (interview, young man, Jordan, May 2021)

In Afghanistan, speaking just before the Taliban takeover in August 2021, Pashtana Durrani, a young woman peacebuilder who works for education and health provision for rural girls, was critical of what she sees as a tiered ecosystem of youth who are in Kabul with 'elite' access to foreign ambassadors and those who are in regional centres or remote parts of the country. She describes, as an example, a peacebuilder

who has access to all these good opportunities, who gets an email because he does have good stable internet And then he goes to Kabul and talks about peace. So, who talks genuinely about peace? ... I'm sure he has some things to say about peace. But ... he hasn't been warstricken ... But he has access and isn't afraid to use it for himself. (interview, 23-year-old young woman, Afghanistan, August 2021)⁵

For Durrani and other youth peacebuilders in countries including Kenya, Venezuela, South Sudan, and Somalia, they feel that there are peers who personally benefit from international attention on 'youth inclusive peacebuilding' and who are not seen as truly representing their communities. This is a different articulation of compromise. This sense of compromise is that the youth have *become compromised* by their efforts to seek capital from the institutions that dominate the field of youth-oriented peacebuilding; they play 'too much' by the current rules of the field for their own legitimation.

In both circumstances, compromise is intentional, and engaged in strategically, as a tool for youth to leverage their actions in the service of their interests (whether altruistic or selfish). Compromise is the way in which youth peacebuilders articulate their navigation of the struggles over position-taking in the field of youth-oriented peacebuilding, moving into the field as-is versus trying to move the shape of the field itself to account for their positions which often historically have fallen outside. It makes visible agency and decision-making in a way that commonly used frameworks like inclusion and co-optation do not.

Compromise in constituting the agenda

Paul Kirby and Laura Shepherd, writing about the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, argue for understanding WPS as a 'policy ecosystem' rather than a single coherent agenda (2021). The idea of a policy ecosystem enables 'analytical attention to dynamics of the field's (re)production that are frequently overlooked in contemporary conventional accounts'. Such a framing is useful for thinking about YPS also, as it emerges in contested and plural ways. This section explores the ways in which aims and commitments can be challenged and compromised in the pursuit of 'forwarding' the YPS agenda.

Here it is also useful to briefly introduce another of Bourdieu's concepts, that of autonomy and heteronomy of a field. Autonomy is the push for a field to exist for its own sake and for the rules of the game (*nomos*) to be defined solely by those within the field; by contrast, heteronomy is favourable to those who already dominant a field socially and politically and whose values align with those of the larger field of power (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 321). Fields are in flux, and one tension is forces originating within a field (struggles for power) and those originating beyond the field itself. When internal forces dominate, a field is relatively autonomous and can pursue its own self-identified goals; however, when external forces dominate the field lacks autonomy and will reproduce the

goals and rules of the larger field (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 320). This is relevant for the field of youth-oriented peacebuilding, and the struggles over position taking within it (i.e. the compromises made by actors), as who is dominant can determine the direction of the field. As discussed in the previous section, the fact youth must play by the existing rules reinforce the relative power of the institutions and the heteronomy of the field (that it reproduces the priorities and capitals of the larger field of peacebuilding, global governance or whatever it may be identified as). Some youth actors take positions that push the field towards more autonomy in changing the ‘rules of the game’ to recognize youth expertise as legitimate on its own terms. Thus, alongside personal decisions about the nature of their engagement with institutional processes discussed above, youth peacebuilders navigate decisions about their engagement in constituting the aims and goals of activities within the YPS agenda. For some, there are moments of opportunity to influence and affect the direction, and at other moments, they describe frustrations and concerns with the goals.

Such tensions are evident even before the formal conception of ‘the’ YPS agenda. In 2015, over 400 adult civil society representatives, representatives from diverse UN bodies, and youth peacebuilders met in Amman, Jordan for the Amman Youth Forum. A key outcome of the forum was a document, the Amman Declaration on Youth Peace and Security. The Amman Declaration represented the first articulation of the aims of an international policy architecture for youth-inclusive peace and security. It is lauded as written *by youth* and framed as being the voices *of youth*. However, while the declaration was undoubtedly more consultative and representative than previous engagements in this space, some attendees in Amman noted that despite significant efforts to ‘socialise’ the draft version of the Declaration and to seek feedback, these efforts were not as successful as they had hoped. Caroline Williams, who previously worked with Search for Common Ground and attended the Amman Youth Forum in 2015, reflects on her own positive experience of engaging in the feedback process towards the Declaration while in Amman. However, she also noted that:

I remember young people being sad, angry, feeling excluded, feeling like it was unfair. So, even when its youth driven and youth designed, and youth led there can still be issues of exclusion and non-participatory practices and maybe non-equitable ... So, it’s good to remind ourselves when we’re getting mad at these non-youth for the way they do things that even we do them ourselves sometimes, it’s just the nature of things. I think that there’s always that compromise at some point of the process, perhaps. (interview, 32-year-old young woman, USA, April 2021)

Unusually, it is notable that language from the Amman Youth Declaration is evident in the first UNSC resolution on YPS (Resolution 2250), unanimously adopted later in 2015 (Berents, 2024). As the initial document of ‘the agenda’ it is significant that a document representing youth interests and voices had such an influence on the shaping of the YPS agenda’s inception, even if those voices and interests were compromised both in the Youth Declaration itself, and then in its encounters with a much wider range of stakeholders and interests once it reached the highly politicized forum of the UNSC (see Berents, 2022). Compromise here constitutes the struggles within the then-nascent field of youth-oriented peacebuilding – where the frontiers were, what the collectively agreed aims looked like, and crucially, who should be involved and what form that involvement took.

Once established as a formal UNSC agenda item, the YPS agenda has subsequently been ‘institutionalised’ across the UN, and other global and regional organizations, adopted by various national governments, as well as being used and championed by youth peace leaders, and Kirby and Shepherd’s conceptualization of a ‘policy ecosystem’ is useful here.

Some of these directions are pursued in line with existing priorities and agendas. One key example is the complexities of alignment of YPS with the P/CVE agendas of UN Member States and other actors (see Altiok, 2024), and the potential ‘securitisation’ of the agenda (Altiok, 2024; Ensor, 2021; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2018). The establishment of a youth-oriented peacebuilding field as necessary and urgent, was in part pushed by global attention in the early 2010s on youth recruitment to violent extremism by ISIS and affiliated organizations (Berents, 2022). This fear of youth susceptibility to extremism, underpinned by enduring stereotypes of youth as always-potentially-violent, encouraged some actors to support YPS. However, other actors in the field wanted YPS to be a counter to these negative narratives, for youth to be ‘part of the solution, not a problem to be solved’ (Simpson, 2018). YPS advocates capitalized on the opening provided by concerns over youth involvement in violent extremism by members of the UNSC, however, this also required a compromise in the framing of their agenda. Here it is evident that even within institutions themselves there is contest and struggle over the shape of the field. It highlights the contest over who has power to define the terms of engagement and crucially recognizes that institutional goals are also not homogenous and they similarly can require compromise.

Youth advocates point to a range of situations where their visions for what the field of youth-oriented peacebuilding could look like are restricted and challenged. Their continued engagement with institutions like the UN are in part motivated by access to resources. However, this access can also involve compromise. Alexandria Bohemier, a member of the Steering Committee for the Canadian Coalition on YPS describes situations where ‘the requirements of the funding prevent us from doing why we exist’ as ‘the biggest catch for us’. ‘If you want our funding’, Bohemier argues:

you have to do this, and we get this say, and we get this say, and then you can’t do this, and you can’t say this, and you can’t talk out about this So, we have to choose between doing the work that we exist to do, and advocating for YPS in the way that we want to and need to, or being paid and having to stop and watch what we say and not be able to do the work that really matters. (interview, 27-year old young person, Canada, April 2022)

For Bohemier, this ‘catch’ is ‘such a shame’ as they’ve seen organizations ‘who do get certain funding, and then the limitations on everything that they can say and do and write about are so limited and their original intent, their original mission, gets so lost’. This perception that the compromise results in a sacrifice of intentions or values can be seen as perhaps closer to existing scholarship on co-optation of civil society agendas by the institutional process. What is crucial to note, however, is that this co-optation is not duplicitous or due to the naivety of the youth involved, but rather a conscious compromise to persist in their advocacy, even if the ‘original mission’ is ‘lost’. All position-taking is a struggle between autonomy and heteronomy; a struggle which can be articulated as a compromise.

This persistence in staying engaged in the policy process of YPS advocacy contrasts with other advocacy domains for youth. Notably, the climate action movement has seen key youth leaders walk away from policy forums – sometimes literally. At COP26 in Glasgow, Fridays for Future activists literally ‘walked out’ in protest when the president was speaking.⁶ While it is not possible to say definitively why this difference exists; I would suggest that the youth climate activists occupy a different position in their field, having more social or political capital outside of formal processes, that enables them to choose to opt-out. For youth in the youth-oriented peacebuilding field, their presence ‘at the table’ has been hard-fought-for and remains exceptionally precarious and untested. At virtual strategy meetings for youth peace activists, conversations have occurred about the cost-benefit equation that advocates must make about their participation.

If youth and adults want to work together then recognizing the relational nature of the field that they occupy is crucial. In the years since the passing of the resolution, this youth peacebuilder has identified how these kinds of relationships require institutional compromise also:

So, after that, this will be also making a commitment for the government and UN agencies on YPS agenda and their relation with the young people. The whole process is admitting, commitment and collaboration. This is for the future. From my perspective I make it like a triangle. The young people, government and UN agencies, and the international organisations and civil society or things. They are working together. Anyone, they can't work alone, and they are working together, and they are working for all of them. So, this process, it needs a lot of transparency, and it need a lot of trust to be clearer, to be valuable. (interview, 27-year-old young man, MENA region, 2021)

Within the field of youth-oriented peacebuilding, both youth and adult actors engage in compromise in multiple ways, as part of the struggle over the boundaries and capital of the field itself. Framing their engagements in this way demonstrates the ways in which youth come to institutions in active ways that are often strategic and complex and move us beyond 'co-optation'. These manoeuvres are often negotiated and navigated with careful reflection and nuanced attention to the context they are operating within. These engagements also require institutional actors to compromise in a variety of ways.

Conclusion

Thinking about compromise in the complexities of contestation over the nature of the field of youth-oriented peacebuilding enables a more nuanced view of the institutionalization of youth inclusion in the peacebuilding field. It asks what encounters with actors representing these institutions and in these institutional spaces look like for youth peace advocates. Doing this helps address the core questions raised by the youth peacebuilder in the introduction – youth peacebuilders articulate as compromise the decision to continue to engage in institutional processes when such engagement requires concessions in original goals (that they 'give up' something) to make some progress (to 'get where they are going').

The resolutions of the YPS agenda have allowed youth peacebuilders to make a case for being taken seriously. While institutionalizing youth peacebuilding can lead to narrowing of the spaces where youth can participate, youth themselves are also instrumentalising the agenda for their own ends. These manoeuvres are often less visible to viewpoints more attuned to the level of institutions but demonstrate how the agenda can both be seen to co-opt youth, but also be co-opted by them. Here then, the idea of compromise, and an agential engagement in the stakes of the agenda from both parties is evident, and moves beyond the more one-sided framing of co-optation by recognizing the choices made by youth. A nuanced understanding of compromise as a constitutive part of the politics of the field of youth-oriented peacebuilding enables a clearer picture of the affordances and limitations of youth agency and of institutional agendas for peace.

Notes

1. This research has received ethics approval from the QUT's University Human Research Ethics Committee, #1900000047 and #2000000226. Since 2023, the author has moved institutions, and the project received administrative review approval from Griffith University Human Research Ethics Board (2023/092).

2. Notable exceptions include the work of Didier Bigo (e.g. 2005; Bigo et al., 2008) who uses field theory to conceptualise ‘the field of security’; and Catherine Goetze’s *The Distinction of Peace* (2017) which examines how peace practitioners constitute peacebuilding as a professional field of expertise.
3. In getting feedback on this work, the term ‘pragmatism’ was also suggested as an explanatory framework for the behaviour being explored here. However, while the literature on pragmatism in global governance is valuable, it was not sufficient to explain the fraught nature of youth’s decision-making processes. In response to an early version of this paper at EWIS in 2023, Rebecca Sutton also offered the term ‘ambivalence’ to capture these dynamics. The thoughtful scholarship of Sharyn Roach Anleu and Kathy Mack on ambivalence in the criminal justice context was very helpful as I developed the idea of compromise. Ambivalence here is not a temperament of apathy or disinterest, but rather it is to hold two positions – a ‘both-and’ rather than ‘either-or’ desire. This beautifully captures the tension expressed by participants and I’m indebted to colleagues for directing my attention to the scholarship on ambivalence, even as I retain the word ‘compromise’ to be true to the articulations of my participants.
4. Ages of all interviewees are their age at the time of the interview.
5. This interview with Durrani was conducted by Savannah Spalding, as part of a youth-led, adult-supported research project that involved myself and another adult researcher who provided training and then supported three youth researchers to conduct virtual interviews with youth peacebuilders in Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar. The material from this project is approved for use in this article (QUT approval #2000000865). For more information about this project and its findings see Spalding et al. (2021) and Berents et al. (2024).
6. My thanks to Jonathan Josefsson for drawing my attention to this comparative point, with this example.

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