

Policy Paper

on Peace and Justice

Manifesto

YMCA Europe cares:

For YMCA Europe, **the concept of peace starts from the absence of violence, conflict, or war**, where there is stability, safety, and predictability, but also where there is a respect for the rule of law and human rights. This is where the concept of peace intertwines with the concept of justice. It has often been said that there is no peace without justice. In our understanding, **justice means equal rights and equal access to rights for all people**, starting from basic human rights. Absence of justice often is linked to oppression, and oppression leads to conflict. To link justice to peace is important: making injustice a part of the past, and not justifying the unjust by neutralizing the situation. We see the importance of this both in peace talks between states and in conflicts between individuals. The absence of justice is often the reason for war and conflict. The opposite, the presence of justice, will be the starting point for peace.

YMCA Europe believes that every human being deserves love and respect, the freedom and possibility to grow in body, mind and spirit. Peace means to live in harmony within communities and among countries, with respect for each other. Peace also means that people, despite their differences, can live together and live their life freely. It means people are free to develop, to move, to love, to live their life as they want, within a set of democratic rules. Respect for culture, religion, or other beliefs and opinions. Justice is freedom, democracy, fairness and equal opportunities for all people regardless age, race, gender, nationality, religion, education, social background, or sexual orientation. All people have the right to live in peace and enjoy basic human rights. We derive this conviction from the inclusive nature of our Christian identity, driven by our belief in on youth empowerment.

Justice is a necessary element of peace. It is only by authentic acknowledgement of the actions of both parties that reconciliation and lasting peace can be achieved. In times of war a social group so big and yet so vulnerable like youth incurs lifelong trauma and has to learn to live with that.

That is why peace is such a complex concept - personal, but also linked to healing as a group. If there is no active effort to cover both dimensions, groups and individuals feel like damages never ceased, even after the combatants left and weapons were silenced.

Since the very beginning of its establishment (1844), the YMCA has assumed service responsibilities in conflict transformation work. Committed to its historical roots and legacy and encouraged by the best programme practices already in place, YMCA Europe has adopted 'Peace and Justice' as a priority and signature programme area within its Strategy 2016–2020.

The YMCA Europe Roots for Reconciliation (RfR) programme, successfully ongoing since 2007, is a key initiative within the above-mentioned strategy implementation plan. The sought impact of the RfR is to achieve stronger youth activism towards peaceful transformation of conflicts in Europe, the Caucasus and Balkans especially considered.

Our role as YMCA Europe in the pursuit of peace and justice is to advocate at every level, but most of all to give a voice to young people to express their needs and concerns, providing tools to be able to deal with conflict and to prevent them, creating just and peaceful communities.

State of affairs: conflicts and their causes

There are still several conflicts around Europe today: cross-border conflicts, disputed borders conflicts, frozen conflicts. We can recognize several areas in this situation, more than the usual hotspots. If we consider also the conflicts arising globally, these conditions are increasing. Some of these conflicts have caused outcomes such as internally displaced people, and a great number of whom are children and young people. There is also an increasing gap between rich and poor, within and between countries. Other tensions within societies in EU countries arise because of economic mobility and migration from poorer areas. There also have been violent attacks on innocent civilians by extremists, and a rise in hate crimes against minority groups. The issue of increased migration towards Europe and violent radicalization has caused also feeling of clash within society between different cultures and ideologies.

Moreover, the rise of nationalism and isolationism aligning to far-right wing movements threatens peace and justice across Europe. This has also given rise to hostile rhetoric around migrants and threatened the founding values of our societies.

The causes of these current conflicts are many, sometimes correlated. There seems to be an increased fracture between East and West in Europe in some cases. In some others, there are lingering religious, ethnic, territorial, and historical tensions, which have never been solved, have been solved partially or are “frozen”.

Economic and geopolitical interests can also be a source for tensions in Europe today, mostly around borders, while within communities, social exclusion can also fuel quite strong tensions too. This is often fueled by a surge in propaganda and populism in recent times, a tendency to call for hatred and intolerance and a lack of cooperation and dialogue. Moreover, corruption is a very widespread issue, which in the long run can lead to instability and conflict. Another reason that may create regional or international tensions that might lead to violent conflicts is the possession of or control over natural resources such as water, arable land, mineral oil, metals, natural gas, and so on.

Part 2: Recommendations

Given the many causes of conflict, we consider that prevention must be the priority for actors intervening in this area, but it is also important to have a holistic approach in the different kind of interventions to undertake.

The main issues

Conflicts impact on young people destructively. They are personally wounded during wars: in their spirit, in their psychological state and mental resilience. Young people or their close ones may be direct victims of war, and in some cases, they may be so marginalized in society that they decide to exert violence as combatants themselves, in an act of rebellion and in search for self-worth.

Conflicts however also create opportunities for many young people and children to assume (sometimes even involuntarily) complex responsibilities, when adults cannot. They may help others in need, earn income and provide for their closest family, provide shelter to refugees, or even form friendships with peers from the “opposite side”, etc.

Conflicts have an impact on daily life and identity. The way in which people can attend school, the relationship with their peers, the behavior on social media, their dreams and outlook about the future, their opportunity to develop soft skills. Proper healing, recovery and transformation at personal level and at social level is necessary to help people overcome their experiences and start over. That healing, in connection with the adoption of a responsible politic vocabulary in public debate can make a lasting change. Transformed, healed young people can share their experience with their closest and become effective peacebuilders.

Injustices impact on young people quite strongly as well: the perceived unfairness leads to the psychological pressure of seeing the lack of opportunities for a prosperous future, and they may develop into strong negative feelings like resentment and frustration.

Pessimism regarding the future and frustration often accompanies a lack of trust toward institutions and civic participation. It has emerged that the main drivers of political violence are rooted not in poverty, but in experiences of injustice: discrimination, corruption, abuse by security forces, and the lack to a proper access to justice. Youth often represents the demographic majority in countries where they are being politically, socially, and economically marginalized. When in those countries there are armed groups, youths are more susceptible to recruitment.

Moreover, injustices represent an attack to young people`s dignity and a threat to a secure and stable life. In this context, living a normal life becomes difficult: there is always the possibility of a losing a job, of being mistreated by the authorities or not being protected by the local forces in case of malfeasances. Recent events have shown that injustices are also deriving from deeply corrupt political and governance systems, and they cause the same frustration than basic human rights violations in time of conflict.

The unfairness of such systems causes the same anger and frustration, and the same lack of hope for a prosperous future. However, we can observe how there is a high involvement of young people, mostly employees and students, who have mobilized and protested against the measures taken by political leaders to stop the fight against corruption in some countries.

Short Term solutions

Our first recommendation to decision makers is to provide spaces, resources and support to peace education, teaching every young person about human rights. It needs to be clear that young people should not be dragged into conflict, recruited or being made target of conflict propaganda. The formal education system should put emphasis on peace education, and on human rights education, making sure all students know their rights. Additionally, the education system should make sure to counteract intolerance and hate campaigns, teaching respect for diversity and inclusion.

This should be done in cooperation with youth organisations as providers of non-formal education in these areas. The importance of non-formal education should be directly recognised, and non-formal education supported with spaces and funding.

The educational action for promoting the concept of peace concerns the content of education and training, educational resources and material,

school and university life, initial and ongoing training for teachers, research, and ongoing training for young people and adults. A culture of peace must take root in the classroom from an early age. It must continue to be reflected in the curricula at secondary and tertiary levels. However, the skills for peace and non-violence can only be learned and perfected through practice. Active listening, dialogue, mediation, and cooperative learning are delicate skills to develop. It means providing both children and adults with an understanding of and respect for universal values and rights. It requires participation at all levels - family, school, places of work, news rooms, play grounds, and the community as well as the nation. The formal education system should also aim at developing critical thinking, mutual respect, cooperation and other soft skills, also through cooperation with youth organizations.

More educational facilities should be provided even in temporary places like refugee camps, along with mental health support, to start the process of healing as soon as possible.

Long term solutions

Governments and international bodies like the EU and the UN should promote education directed at creating an inclusive society, understanding and embracing diversity. Building a culture of human rights is a pre-condition to achieving peace. All national governments should focus on building bridges of communications and collaborations and not to destabilize communities, respecting everyone's right to exist and express themselves. They should emphasize and work toward educating to understand global issues and challenges, to build and improve conflict resolution skills. All governments should live by international standards of human rights and equity, appreciating and allowing for cultural diversity.

The aim for public bodies should be to strive towards a system of equity: governments should ensure equal access to opportunities for young people, for a better integration of minorities and the respect of their rights, and to assure a greater transparency concerning the laws adopted. Public bodies also need to recognize and address the dangers of hate campaigns, and in particular they should try to prevent the misuse of media. While we underline the vital importance that free and independent mass media has for a democratic system, we also cannot forget how easy it is to spread hate today via traditional or social media, hate that can easily translate into violence.

Most importantly, all countries should strive for cooperation: economic and political, cultural and commercial partnerships. This entails the fact that policies based on free movement of people should progress, in particular allowing young people like students and young workers greater mobility. It has been proven how travelling and living in different countries gives young people an open mind, more open to understand and more averse to conflict¹. Spaces and funding support should be given also to youth organizations in general to be able to provide young people with these kinds of opportunities to grow safe and develop skills, learning to coexist with all people in all countries.

European countries and international organizations like the EU and the UN should also strive to prevent economic exploitation worldwide, which will in turn stop fueling wars. These organizations should also coordinate action and direct efforts to solve conflicts in Europe and in the world: a real danger today is the inability or unwillingness to act of institutions who could in fact pacify areas with their diplomatic intervention.

However, conflicts still happen today, as injustices. In these cases, after the ceasing of a conflict, all governments and international organizations shall strive to ensure justice and give solace to those who seek it. This is a tough process that need to be handled with care and respect for all.

YMCA Europe and other NGOs should be involved in this process, acting as advocates but also as gatherer of information and connectors of communities: while those who were wronged need justice, the communities need healing, and NGOs are a very effective tool to ensure that justice does not endanger peace.

National governments and entities like the EU and the UN should ensure that violations of human rights and international humanitarian law are brought to justice, and that oppressed minorities and individuals can find justice.

Hatred and racism should also be condemned: far from a mere restriction of the freedom of speech, it should be recognized that inciting hatred has serious consequences and is a threat to peace and justice in society.

1. Merryfield, M.M. and Subedi, B., 2006. Decolonizing the mind for world-centered global education. The social studies curriculum: Purposes, problems, and possibilities, pp.283-295.

The decision-makers dealing with conflicts today could definitely improve their efforts towards long-term solutions.

There is a lack of cooperation between European countries regarding conflict management and prevention, with a predominance of consideration of economic interests. There might not be enough political will or capacity to operate on these issues: there is often a lack of a comprehensive and coherent strategy to solve conflicts, causing short term or ineffective solutions.

The role of civil society

Besides the work already done by YMCA Europe through RfR programme, two recommendations can be considered:

1. *The use/ promotion of non-governmental diplomacy* – YMCA Europe is already active and has experience in working with young people affected by conflicts, which can be developed into becoming a catalyst for non-governmental diplomacy. That means developing cooperation with decision makers, providing case-studies, statistics, analyses etc.

2. *The use/the promotion of citizen diplomacy* - Young people from the communities affected by conflicts are also empowered by YMCA Europe to act as citizen diplomats, to promote the dialogue with other communities; Leadership Programmes like this can be adapted to conflict zones in the form of *Citizen Diplomats* programmes, fostering a better understanding between communities.

Thus, national governments and actors like the EU should also ensure spaces and funding for youth organisations operating in areas of conflict and injustices: their greater impact and outreach can ensure to involve all groups and go further than institutional actors.

The European Union should also support youth organizations in their role through common initiatives, using different economic and political instruments, aiming at capacity building for youth and youth organizations, especially regarding governance and participation in decision making processes at a national, regional and international level.

Young people need to be given a voice in the political arena, and to be heard. This is how they will have room to develop their own ideas and models to achieve peace and justice in their communities.

Support to young people's participation in inclusive political processes and democratic practices should happen through three measures, covering the wider enabling environment, individual capacity building and a specific focus on youth and peace related issues:

- Spread awareness on the work of youth organisations: let young people know that these resources exist and that they support them and stand up for them (signposting);
- Work with youth organisations to make their services available to young people of all ages, and develop citizen education;
- Contact youth organisations in case of problematic situations: cooperation between schools, social services and youth organizations with a holistic approach.

YMCA Europe

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