

Ecumenical International Youth Day 2023 Toolkit

Young People and Their Voices from the Warzones



World Council
of Churches

Ecumenical International Youth Day 2023 Toolkit Young People and Their Voices from the Warzones

This WCC publication is a project of the WCC Youth Engagement in the ecumenical movement, working closely with its youth network. The contributors to this year's toolkit are Andrei Ursulean and Stefan Wilson.

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Introduction

Rationale

This year's theme for Ecumenical Youth Day is **Young People and Their Voices from the Warzones**. Political insurrection and ideologies have permeated the fabric of society. This has caused division and hatred, resulting in the loss of innocent lives.

"What about the future of our children?"¹ These are the words of the youth office of the Sudan Council of Churches in April 2023, following armed conflict that led to the death of thousands of people, and the displacement of at least a million more. The reality is that the world is constantly threatened by conflicts, wars, and injustice. Often this means that young people are caught in situations which do not reflect their intentions and views.

Conflicts and injustice disrupt the lives of young people on various levels. They not only face displacement and loss, but they are also made responsible to fight, protect, and provide regardless of the side they are on. The horrifying reality of wars, instability, and high exposure to violence leads to trauma, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression. All these aspects are part of a vicious cycle that traps young people in environments and situations characterized by injustice and inequity. Additionally, discrimination, poverty, corruption, and lack of basic services leave them susceptible to radicalization, extremism, and violence.

Addressing the realities young people face in the world today represents a moral imperative for and crucial aspect of peace-building. Providing them with access to education and psychological support is the only solution for their empowerment. Through this toolkit, the World Council of Churches via youth engagement in the ecumenical movement, extends an invitation and encourages all member churches and ecumenical partners to participate in this year's Ecumenical International Youth Day. This year, there is a special desire to draw attention to the situation of young people who live the hard realities of wars, conflicts, and injustice. This document contains resources and suggested ways to observe this day and adapt it to your context.

Biblical Focus

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is one of the most influential passages of scripture for Christian life. Sitting on a mountain with a crowd of people listening to him, he speaks simple and straightforward verses,² known as the Beatitudes. In Matthew 5:9 Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers; they shall be called God's children." What does it mean to be a peacemaker? Is it simply an absence of conflict? Is it living in harmony? When Jesus calls the peacemakers blessed, he marks the reality that there is division, strife, and raging battles. To be a peacemaker means more than shaping a world without conflict. It means a transformative change into a person who

¹ Youth Office of the Sudan Council of Churches, "Statement," 21 April 2023, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-by-the-youth-office-of-the-sudan-council-of-churches>.

² Hanz Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), ix.

promotes conflict resolution, restorative justice, and a desire to promote unity in the Lord. When that is practiced, such people are called God's children. Clearly, practicing peacemaking and peacebuilding shapes the identity of the Christian believer, promoting a witness to the teachings of Christ. Healing is brought to a broken and divided world. Only then would we see each other as neighbours and not enemies, called to love another (Mark 12:31)

Conflicts and its effects on young people

Young people are often the first victims of conflicts, instability, and wars.³ Facing looming consequences including military drafts, assault, injury and abduction, or long-term repercussions caused by political and social instability. These long-term effects, such as loss of access to education, can lead to serious mental health problems, more acute than the actual witnessing of violence⁴. Worldwide, according to UNICEF, out of 600 million children and adolescents unable to attain minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics,⁵ over 200 million do not benefit from any form of education. This crisis has been aggravated by the conflicts in Sudan, Ukraine, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and many more.

In Ukraine alone over 5 million children and young people are directly affected and unable to access education.⁶ In Yemen, one in five children are out of school, and in Syria, over 2.4 million young people were out of school in 2021. Moreover, even in places where students are allowed to continue their education, conflicts can severely affect the quality of their education.⁷ At the same time, schools can be used to promote violence by "emphasizing cultural, religious, classist or ethnic differences."⁸ Despite these challenges, education in conflict-torn regions could have positive effects in stopping injustice and inequality and in promoting human rights and social participation.

Gender differences, either biological or psychological, are also important when analyzing the impact of wars and conflicts on young people. Some studies show that boys' education is more affected than that of girls. This can be explained by the fact that boys are often conscripted or required to work to reduce the economic shock of conflict. It can also be accounted for by the fact that more boys than girls attended school prior to the outbreak of conflict. On the other

³ Thomas Poirier, "The effects of armed conflict on schooling in sub-Saharan Africa," *International Journal of Educational Development*, 32 (2012), 341.

⁴ Jo Boyden, "The moral development of child soldiers: What do adults have to fear?" in *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Psychology*, 9 (2003) 344.

⁵ "Education: Every child has the right to learn," UNICEF, <https://www.unicef.org/education>.

⁶ "Ukraine war disrupts education for more than five million children: UNICEF" UNICEF, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/01/1132757>.

⁷ Amir Jones and Ruth Naylor, *The quantitative impact of armed conflict on education: Counting the human and financial costs*, CfBT Education Trust and Protect Education in Insecurity and Conflict (PEIC), 2014, 13.

⁸ Nicola Johns et al, "Disrupted educational pathways: The effects of conflict on adolescent educational access and learning in war-torn Ethiopia," *Frontiers in Education* (2022), 3.

hand, girls' education can suffer more when war ideologies overlap with patriarchal principles. In Afghanistan in 2007, female education was "specifically targeted by Taliban militia in Swat (Afghanistan) because it was considered a Western invention."⁹ Moreover, gender-based violence and discrimination are among the reasons why girls' education can suffer more due to parents' fears of targeted violence.

Education for refugees

In 2022, 103 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide.¹⁰ According to a UNHCR report, over 36.5 million were children below the age of 18. Considering these enormous numbers, the issue of reintegrating children into the educational system becomes a matter of urgency. Available data shows that only 3% of refugees continue studies in higher education.¹¹ The reality is that most refugee families face difficulties in covering schooling expenses and providing needed documentation. At the same time, the resettlement of refugees is rather unlikely, considering that less than 0.5% of refugees have the possibility to resettle in another country or region.

Access to education is a fundamental human right which should be universally available to all individuals. For young people fleeing conflict, education is immensely important. It creates a sustainable pattern, equipping them with needed skills and knowledge, and empowers them to make a positive contribution to the societies and cultures that have nurtured them. For example, in 2022, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine launched a platform through which Ukrainian refugees can study online and access learning materials and tests up to the 11th grade.

The challenges young refugee children or adolescents face are not only matters of integration, but they also have to overcome language and cultural barriers, trauma, and interrupted schooling. At the same time, the logistics of their integration have to be done carefully to avoid overcrowding and a shortage of teachers. In this sense, creating a curriculum and an inclusive environment is an essential element in their education. Providing language support, documentation assistance, psychological help, and qualified personnel in trauma awareness teaching methods are only some of the elements that will lead to their growth and reintegration. Facilitating this process can have positive outcomes, both for individuals and for society, promoting diversity and fostering social cohesion.

While vocally advocating for peace, justice, and reconciliation, the World Council of Churches encourages its member churches and ecumenical partners to work toward the reintegration of young people into educational systems and raise awareness about the urgency of this matter in times of conflict and beyond. The centralization of data on integrating refugee children into new educational systems is a difficult undertaking. However, meaningful work has been done by some WCC member churches and ecumenical partners like, the Lutheran World Federation, ACT Alliance, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese in America, as well as the Romanian Orthodox Church, and many more.

⁹ Johns et al, 3.

¹⁰ Refugee Data Finder, UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics>.

¹¹ Aiming Higher, UNHCR, <https://unrefugees.ch/en/aiming-higher>.

Conflict and post-conflict situations for child soldiers

When talking about conflict and its aftermath, young people often find themselves at the end of both barricades. They are the ones recruited first, but they can also be the first voice against violence. The age of recruitment for young people is low around the world. Compulsory military service is still a global reality, with an average age of conscription between 17-19 years.

At the same time, the reality is that many children and young women are recruited by force in armies and armed groups. Between 2005 and 2020, more than 93,000 children were recruited and used.¹² According to the same report, “often referred to as ‘child soldiers,’ these boys and girls suffer extensive forms of exploitation and abuse that are not fully captured by that term.”¹³ This is explained by the fact that they are not only used as fighters, but as guards, messengers, or scouts. The means by which recruitment happens is not always clear; some of them are coerced and manipulated, while others are abducted and threatened.

While visibly suffering, they are often marginalized and they face reintegration difficulties due to various factors such as trauma and psychological distress, malnutrition, social suspicion, and many more.

¹² “Children recruited by armed forces and armed groups,” UNICEF, <https://www.unicef.org/protection/children-recruited-by-armed-forces>.

¹³ “Children recruited by armed forces and armed groups,” UNICEF.



Gender-related concerns

Young women are also often recruited by armed forces, working as caregivers, cooks, scouts, and providers of sexual services. Conflict, however, often results in high levels of gender-based violence, arbitrary torture, sexual exploitation, violence, and forced marriage. Moreover, according to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “gender-based violence also spikes in post-conflict societies, due to the general breakdown of the rule of law, the availability of small arms, the breakdown of social and family structures.”¹⁴

Internally, women suffer more from displacement than men, have no access to reproductive health care services, and are often excluded from decision-making processes. Moreover, women play a significant role in peacebuilding. Young women are often the forefront of positive social change and advocates of social justice, mobilizing communities, organizing campaigns and marches, and being a voice for diversity and equity. At the same time, the significance of women in peacebuilding has also been recognized by the UN Security Council resolution 1325, which highlights different gender perspectives in peace negotiations, gender equality in the UN, and the protection of women and girl refugees.¹⁵

¹⁴ “Heightened gender-based violence in conflict and post-conflict zones,” Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/women/womens-human-rights-and-gender-related-concerns-situations-conflict-and-instability>.

¹⁵ *Landmark resolution on Women, Peace and Security*, online source: www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/#resolution





Activism and Advocacy

What can people outside warzones do?

People outside warzones and places of conflict can play a crucial role in supporting those in need and advocate for peacebuilding:

- Raise awareness by sharing informational materials on how war and conflicts affect the lives of millions of people worldwide every year.
- Educate others about the causes, evolution, possible outcomes, and solutions regarding war and conflicts.
- Advocate for peacebuilding and respect for human rights, as well as encouraging dialogue in your community, with governance bodies, with church authorities, and so on.
- Supporting young refugees to re-enroll in the educational system of your country and assist them in the reintegration process.
- Supporting humanitarian organizations that provide aid to war and conflict-affected areas, including through financial donations, contributions of non-perishable food, or by volunteering.
- Monitor and report abuses of young people and refugees in your area.
- Promote long-term initiatives aimed at creating an inclusive environment for young people.
- Encourage and foster cultural inclusiveness that brings people from war zones and conflicts together.
- Advocate for peace and political stability by engaging in organizational dialogue and promoting diplomacy.

How can you become an advocate?

How will young people implicated in or fleeing war zones and conflicts be able to return to their lives? As previously discussed, this complex question touches on multiple issues. This responsibility, however, is not only in the hands of young people living these realities or young refugees, but in ours too. In becoming an advocate for young people, one may consider the following steps:

- Educate yourself about the nature, source, cultural dynamics, and current situation of the conflict.
- Choose a specific area by identifying an aspect of peacebuilding that most interests you.
- Do volunteer work and join humanitarian organizations.
- Engage with local communities. Get in touch with policymakers regarding awareness-raising campaigns and host discussions about these problems.
- Use social media to gather and share testimonies from those directly affected.
- Collaborate with other advocates, whether on an individual or organizational level.
- Keep yourself informed about developments on the ground and respond accordingly.

Observing Ecumenical International Youth Day 2023

Methodology

You can observe this year's theme in multiple ways across the world. Being shaped by a warzone can be culturally unique and different in each situation. It is our hope that our proposed methodology is contextually sensitive, inclusive, and received with appreciation. Events marking Ecumenical International Youth Day can take a variety of forms as we listen to young people and their voices from warzones.

- Nationwide church events, including seminars, youth gatherings, and symposiums
- Small-scale group events, including local church community gatherings
- Ecumenical common prayer
- Sharing personal testimonies, individual reflections, and social media stories

Whether it is 100 people, or simply 2 or 3, any form of participation is an act of solidarity, a cry for justice as young people face the struggles of growing up in a warzone. It is a fight for an end to this traumatic experience and a transformation to a world of peace, justice, and renewal.

Suggested programme

The following can be used as a guide for participating in this event. This programme can be done at the national church level or adapted for local use.

TIMING	ACTIVITY	DESCRIPTION
5 minutes	Call to Join the Movement	Participants can use an instrument unique to their culture (bell/cymbal/flute/drums) and sound it multiple times. A procession can take place, with people holding slogans painted with red to signify bloodshed.
10 minutes	Common Prayer by Youth	Prayer, song, and meditation, setting the tone for reflection.
10 minutes	Introduction	Welcome to the Ecumenical International Youth Day Event! Introduction of the theme. Excerpts from this document can be used.
20 minutes	Presentation	Panelists engage and discuss the topic of young peoples' involvement and impact in warzones. This can include a discussion on how advocacy can help stop this.
30 minutes	Discussion	Open-ended discussion with all invited. This can include breaking into small groups or a round table conversation on how youth participation can help end the cycles of war.
10 minutes	A Call to Action	A large canvas or piece of board is placed in the middle. Everyone is invited to take off their shoes and make painted handprints to imprint their unique human signature as a sign of solidarity with youth affected by war and conflict around the world.
5 minutes	Conclusion	Wrap-up
5 minutes	Closing Prayer	Youth make a circle around the canvas and pray for youth across the world who are threatened in warzones.

Common prayer

The following liturgy can be used as a guide for the common prayer.

In a quiet space, light a candle and place it in the centre of your worship space. Let all gather round it and sit in silence for a few moments. A soft melody can be played in the background.

L: God calls us, just as we are, to feel the pain, suffering, injustice, and cries of the young people in battle. God calls us just as we are to stop, to listen to their cries, to speak out, and to unite as one voice.

R: We unite our hearts in prayer.

L: God calms any doubt and fear, knowing that He is still God in the chaos, in the strife, in the turmoil.

R: So we wait upon the Lord as our strength is renewed.



Opening Prayer:

O Lord, the God of justice, peace, and unity. Hear our cries and attend to our prayer. We seek you in this struggle, in this war, in this battle. You are our Rock and Shield. May we feel the presence of Your Spirit working in us and equipping our voice for the journey. Amen.

Opening Song: The Kingdom of God is Justice and Peace (Taize)

[The Kingdom of God](#)

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:9-10

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

This is the word of the Lord.

R: Thanks be to God.

Silent Reflection *(one voice can repeat these three questions at intervals)*

What was the purpose of Jesus' statements on the mount?

How do they resonate with our call to be a "voice for the youth in the warzones?"

What does it mean for us to be peacemakers?



Prayer of Intercession

L: Praise be to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Holy Trinity, for you are the one who sees all things and stands with the oppressed in the world. We beseech your throne today, with petitions set on our hearts for the youth of the world who are affected by the wars between countries.

ALL: Lord, hear us, we pray.

L: We stand with all young people of all ages, races, genders, and ethnicities who are exposed to extremism and violence by armed forces in the warzones. We mourn the bloodshed witnessed across the borders of these wars and seek your divine intervention to end these wars.

ALL: Look upon your children, O God.

L: We lament for young people and refugees who cannot access education, and for schools who promote acts of violence through fundamentalist ideals. We see this as a direct opposition to your Son's call for us to be peacemakers. May your divine Light shine through this and dispel the darkness.

ALL: Lord, be our light in the darkness.

L: We remember the child soldiers who walk these zones. Lord, these innocent lives have now been touched by these traumatic experiences, jeopardizing their childhood as they are forced to align with armies and militias for battle. We speak against this in your name, and pray for relief, restoration, and renewal for these children to return to their homes with their families.

ALL: Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

L: Look upon your sons and daughters who also are affected by these warzones, seeing their children displaced, being forced to work as caregivers and cooks, and even falling prey to sexual exploitation. We cry out against this injustice with a firm voice, and beseech you to intervene and bring them out of this misery and into safety.

Hear all our petitions as we offer our silent prayer before you . . .

Lord, hear us, for our hearts long for you. We offer this prayer in through your Son Jesus Christ, who taught us as a family to say together . . . *(The Lord's Prayer in your own language)*

Closing Song: I Am Sure I shall See the Goodness of the Lord

[I Am Sure I Shall See the Goodness of the Lord](#)

Benediction

Acts of solidarity

Your participation in this global call to end war, pain, and suffering can be done in a myriad of ways. The beauty of having unity in diversity is seen in the ability to express one idea through multiple lenses. Youth across the world can participate this movement in the following ways, each is an act of solidarity:

1. Post a short video of yourself reflecting on this year's theme and share via social media platforms.
2. Share intercessory prayers.
3. Post slogans or posters on your local community or church notice boards.
4. Connect with youth leaders throughout your community and promote activism by conducting presentations in local schools.
5. Connect with the ecumenical organizations of your country and share your resources, including video clips and presentations, to promoting (or promote) an end to war.

Whether it be a small or grand gesture, participating in this movement is an act of solidarity. Let your voice be heard!



Contributors

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