



# POLICY BRIEF

## Youth Ambassadors for Peace: how did they fare?

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This policy brief reflects on the tenure of the first cohort of African Youth Ambassadors for Peace. It emphasises the ways in which they contributed to promoting youth participation in efforts to achieve peace on the continent. Because youth ambassadors are integral to the acknowledgement, support and promotion of young people's contribution, policymakers need to enhance their working relations with Africa's youth ambassadors.

## Key findings

- ▶ The African Youth Ambassadors for Peace (AYAPs) contributed to the evolution of peace and security policy in several African Union Peace and Security Council (PSC) sessions on the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda. The AYAPs implemented region-specific projects and capacity-building activities for young peacebuilders.
- ▶ The AU, particularly through the PSC, has consistently recognised and promoted the YPS agenda.
- ▶ To succeed, this initiative requires greater commitment, investment and support from all YPS stakeholders, including youth and their networks. The role of the ambassadors in mainstreaming youth in peace and security must be recognised.
- ▶ The AYAPs capitalised on the new 'virtual norm' resulting from COVID-19 to overcome barriers to youth participation such as the small number of young people able to attend physical meetings due to cost and logistical challenges.
- ▶ Through their participation in conversations and platforms, the AYAPs boosted youth participation in decision making, policy formulation and the implementation and monitoring of peace agreements. These engagements strengthened the growing appreciation of young people's value to peacebuilding.
- ▶ Lessons from the first cohort of AYAPs must shape the current (second) set of AYAPs and future iterations, ensuring that the initiative's contributions to YPS are upscaled and sustained.

## Recommendations

### African Union:

- ▶ Promote greater familiarity with and implementation of frameworks on YPS as blueprints for youth-related programming and interventions.

### RECs/RMs:

- ▶ Encourage greater synergy between AYAPs and the regional economic communities/ regional mechanisms (RECs/RMs) for conflict prevention, management and resolution to upscale and strengthen national platforms for youth, peace and security.

### Civil society and development partners:

- ▶ Support advocacy around youth, peace and security, as well as training and capacity building for young people working on peace and security issues.

### AYAPs:

- ▶ Build personal and institutional capacities of youth peacebuilders and networks to understand and contribute to YPS in the African context, in line with the AU's normative frameworks.
- ▶ Use the various Youth for Peace (Y4P) platforms and networks established by the AU, RECs and member states to create a vibrant 'community of practice' to deepen synergy among youth peacebuilders and their networks.
- ▶ Engage in targeted, sustained advocacy to remove barriers that prevent youth peacebuilders and young people in general from enjoying the dividends of peace and stability.
- ▶ Identify and tap into innovative opportunities to promote the YPS agenda, drawing on social media, sports and the creative and performance arts.

## Introduction

The importance of youth in advancing Africa's peace and security agenda is gaining currency. Within the African Union (AU), the evolution of the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda has been encouraging, with a number of developments, starting with the inauguration of the Youth for Peace (Y4P) Africa Program in September 2018.

The AU's Peace and Security Council (PSC) held open sessions on YPS and endorsed a study titled 'The Roles and Contributions of Youth to Peace and Security in Africa'. The Continental Framework on YPS and its 10-Year Implementation Plan was adopted by the PSC and African Youth Ambassadors for Peace (AYAPs) were selected.

Particularly, the appointment of AYAPs addresses the broad challenge of mainstreaming youth in the peace and security agenda. This includes their participation in high-level discussions that contribute to policymaking by bringing the perspectives, aspirations and lived experiences of young people to bear in varied policy spaces. Their advocacy and the implementation of policies that advance the recognition, participation and enhancement of the role of the youth and their contributions to peace and security are valuable.

The appointment of the first cohort of AYAPs for each of Africa's five geographic regions was a major landmark, signposting the growing recognition that youth are pivotal to peace and security. The project was launched under the auspices of the AU's Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS) Department, to ensure that the AYAPs serve as interlocutors between young peacebuilders and the AU. Their activities have brought home the important aspiration expressed in Article 17 of the African Youth Charter (AYC): that young people can make meaningful and sustainable contributions to policy formulation and implementation in the peace and security sphere.

With the conclusion of the first cohort of the AYAPs' two-year tenure, it is vital to reflect on their accomplishments and challenges in executing their mandate of advocating for and promoting the mainstreaming and inclusion of African youths in peace and security.

This policy brief discusses the role and contributions of the first set of AYAPs to YPS with a view to learning

lessons and identifying pathways for improvement for subsequent cohorts. It is based on rich perspectives shared by the first cohort of AYAPs as they were completing their two-year tenure in 2021. The 'exit' conversations with the youth ambassadors teased out the major lessons they learned while also reflecting on some challenges they faced and how these were mitigated.

The conversations also enabled the AYAPs the opportunity to reflect on their perspectives regarding the potential of young people to scale up their roles and contributions to peace and security in Africa.

## The appointment of the first cohort of African AYAPs for each of Africa's five geographic regions was a major landmark

To put the above in proper context, the brief highlights the evolution of YPS policies on the continent. It focuses on how the AYAPs pursued and delivered on their mandates, taking cognisance of key opportunities and challenges. And it provides sample testimonials from a wide range of individual and institutional stakeholders that worked with the AYAPs. The ultimate goal is not only to take insights from their experiences in order to inform future policy and programming on YPS but also to document lessons learned and their policy implications, moving forward.

## Bringing youth for peace into the mainstream

The continent's YPS agenda has evolved significantly since 2018, when the AU Peace and Security Department (now PAPS) inaugurated the Y4P Africa Program.

With the primary objective and responsibility of mainstreaming African youth into peace and security,<sup>1</sup> the Y4P initiative seeks to implement YPS policy frameworks, in line with the evolving AU normative frameworks that began with the adoption of the AYC in 2006. Almost 15 years later, in 2020, the Continental Framework on Youth, Peace and Security (CFYPS) was adopted, along with an accompanying 10-Year Implementation Plan.

The CFYPS, through its five priorities – participation, prevention, protection, partnership and coordination – as well as disengagement and reintegration and crosscutting issues, seeks to promote youth inclusion in peace and security in Africa.<sup>2</sup>

Since November 2018, these youth-focused policies, initiatives and programs have opened a new window of opportunity in Africa, with notable influences from the global YPS agenda, including key UN Security Council Resolutions 2250 (2015), 2419 (2018) and 2535 (2021).

What is particularly notable about the Y4P initiative is that its core mandates were derived from extensive consultations with youth peacebuilders across the continent, rather than being devised as a top-down process imposed on the youth by the AU. It is instructive that the decision not to impose priorities and programs on youth peacebuilders has continued to ensure that the Y4P initiative is not only able to receive the buy-in and full support of young people but also that their yearnings and aspirations are mainstreamed in all its activities.

### The AYAPs focused on training and capacity building for youth peacebuilders in their regions

The other impetus driving the Y4P agenda is the strategic decision to develop a close working relationship with decision makers, especially the PSC, which is the AU's highest decision-making organ on matters of peace and security. This has created the opportunity to sustain the requisite political will required for progress in the YPS. Barely two months after the inauguration of the Y4P program, it successfully advocated for the first-ever PSC Open Session on Youth Peace and Security, which was held on 8 November 2018 in commemoration of Africa Youth Day.

That inaugural session, and subsequent ones held, has become a way for the PSC to be kept abreast of YPS developments, challenges and policy recommendations. This has given the PSC a basis for making pronouncements that have significantly altered the discourse and praxis surrounding the YPS agenda in Africa. In a nutshell, the Y4P has played a significant role in keeping the PSC informed of important developments and requisite information to inform future policy pronouncements and to better support the scaling up of YPS programming and activities among youth peacebuilders.

Indeed, one of the critical decisions of the AU PSC is the need to designate young women and men as peace ambassadors to complement the work of the AU Youth Envoy. Together, they can champion the promotion of peace on the continent and be the voice of the youth in policy spaces while also bridging the gap between the youth constituency and policymakers.

### Lessons from the first youth ambassadors for peace

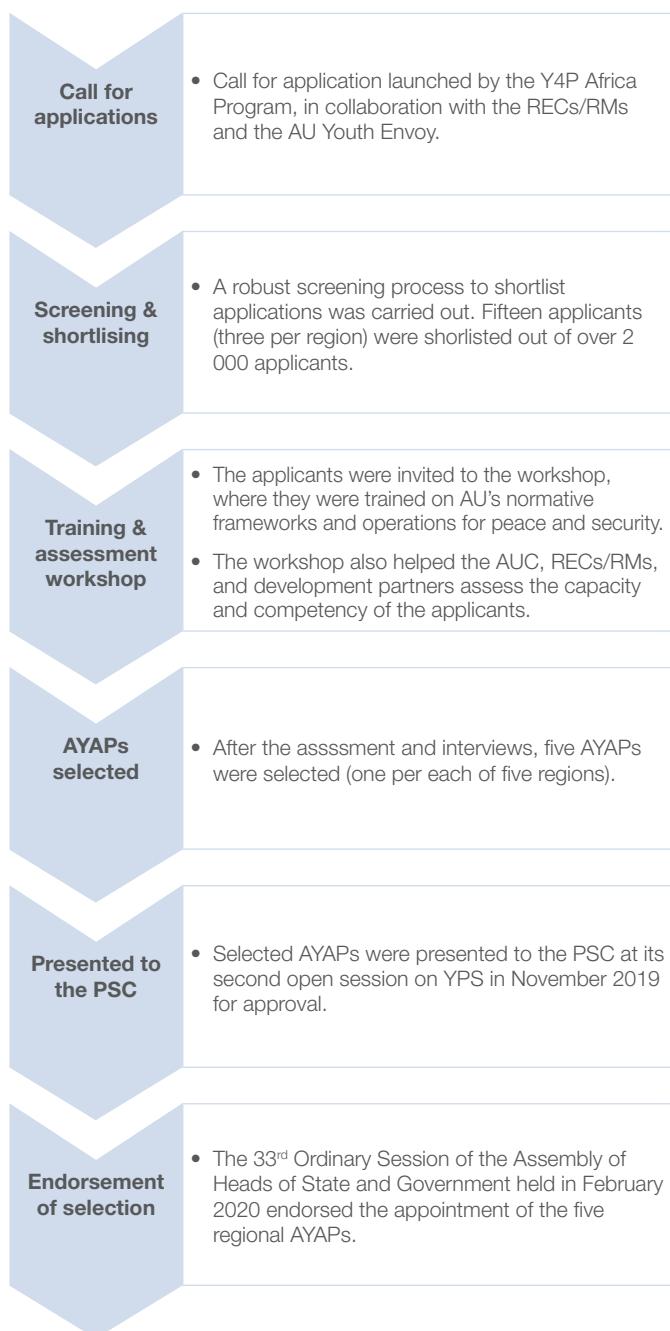
The primary mandate of the youth ambassadors included advocating for the mainstreaming and inclusion of young Africans in the peace and security sector and its activities by amplifying their contributions and resilience. At the same time, it was important to ensure that the challenges hindering their inclusion and contributions would be addressed by policy and programs.

Under the supervision of the Y4P Africa program, the AYAPs were able to conceptualise and implement region-specific projects in line with the priorities of the 10-Year YPS Implementation Plan to scale up youth participation in peace and security issues in their respective regions. AYAPs were expected to provide leadership to youth peacebuilders and networks and support the implementation of PAPS initiatives and programs on peace and security.

The AYAPs focused on training and capacity building for youth peacebuilders in their regions. Each AYAP was encouraged to have regional consultations to determine the priority issues within their respective regions. The outcomes of these consultations juxtaposed with their personal experiences enabled them to implement region-specific projects.

Their participatory approach to the conceptualisation and implementation of programs and projects also made them seek out their peers with a wide range of technical expertise and rely on them to advance their peacebuilding efforts. Notably, there was an intentional strategy to rely on other young peacebuilders as facilitators and trainers to promote peer-to-peer learning and experience-sharing, while also addressing the perennial exclusion of youth from specific roles and spaces common in many countries.

**Chart 1: African Youth Ambassadors selection timeline**



The selection process of the 1<sup>st</sup> cohort of the AYAPs

**Chart 2: List of first cohort of AYAPs (2020-2022)**

	Name	Region	Country of origin
1	Alhafiz Hassan Ahamat	Central	Chad
2	Emma Ng'ang'a	East	Kenya
3	Mohammed Edabbar	North	Libya
4	Karabo Mokgonyana	South	South Africa
5	Moctar Kané	West	Mali

The first cohort of AYAPs took advantage of more cost-effective and easily accessible digital opportunities to train and increase the capacity building of young peacebuilders in different peace and security thematic areas to address the gaps and challenges that mitigate the full involvement of youth.

The new 'virtual norm' that came in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic enabled the AYAPs to mobilise and collaborate more effectively. It also overcame participation barriers with regard to the small number of young people able to physically meet due to cost and logistical challenges. Paradoxically, although the cutting of travel time grew engagements and resulted in wider coverage and increased impact, the sheer number of virtual activities also led to fatigue, as evident in the steady drop in the numbers of young people registering and actively participating.

As travel bans and restrictions were lifted, the AYAPs were able to arrange face-to-face engagements to bring the voices of young people to the policy spaces. They participated in several high-level conversations, including PSC open sessions, inter-generational dialogues and AU-PAPS events, where they continuously amplified the essence of youth participation in decision-making processes, policy formulation and implementation, and the monitoring of governance and peace agreements. These engagements further strengthened the growing appreciation of the value that the youth contribute to peacebuilding.

The AYAPs also used these platforms to popularise the CFYPS as well as to advocate and promote the mainstreaming and inclusion of young Africans in peace and security programs and activities. Apart from amplifying their contributions, such opportunities allow them to collaborate and promote exchanges across national, regional and continental boundaries. Nevertheless, there were a number of challenges the AYAPs faced which hindered their optimal performance. These challenges mainly emanated from, or were related to, the scourge of the coronavirus pandemic which hit the world within less than two months of the cohort starting their tenure in February 2020.

Among the challenges was the AU's inability to implement a range of capacity-building initiatives for the AYAPs, including the induction/training

activity that was intentionally planned to expose them to the complexities of the African peace and security landscape as well as the AU's administrative procedures. Included in those procedures are aspects relating to planning and financial regulations, peace and security priorities, and project management.

This activity had been planned to ensure that the AYAPs received tailored briefings from key departments, divisions and units of the AU Commission with the aim of properly grounding them, with the requisite knowledge to plan, implement and report activities. The inability to hold this onsite training contributed to the initial slow pace of work and to the frustration felt among the cohort with regards to dealing with bureaucratic procedures and processes.

Other related issues such as the travel bans and restrictions limited the ability to reach out physically to their primary constituents in their respective regions, as well as to develop personal relationships in the policymaking spaces that would have enabled them to achieve even more. However, while this limited the AYAPs' capacity to consult widely with and understand the particular challenges their contemporaries faced in different parts of the continent, it also raised the imperative as well as urgency to the use of technology as a mitigation tool.

## Responses to the pandemic reflected the resilience and humane attitude of young peacebuilders across the continent

Many interactions were held online, and the AYAPs were able to consolidate these with in-person activities towards the tail end of their tenure. These online and in-person interactions include participation in the development of the UNESCO-IICBA training manual on 'Peacebuilding and Prevention of Violence Through Education', the 'AU Youth Silencing the Guns' and the 'No Room for Hate Speech' campaigns.

Another opportunity that the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore was the space it presented for the AYAPs to draw on personality traits, networks and other qualities which have since been identified as characteristics of young peacebuilders on the continent:

their capacity to transcend adversity by creatively mobilising and building resilience.<sup>3</sup>

The spread of the virus, and measures taken to contain it, exacerbated the already fragile conditions faced by many young Africans and undermined their efforts to contribute towards peace and security. But the response to the pandemic reflected the resilience and humane attitude of young peacebuilders across the continent.

Overall, testimony from policy organs and the youth constituencies they worked with suggested that the first cohort of AYAPs made modest contributions towards advancing the YPS agenda in Africa during their tenure.

Specifically, the PSC commended the 'the first cohort of AYAPs, whose tenure ended in February 2022, for their contributions in advancing the meaningful participation of young peacebuilders across the Continent; and notes with appreciation the AYAPs' contributions to the 'AU Youth Silencing the Guns Campaign' in 2020, the respective youth, peace and security priorities across the five regions, collaboration with RECs/RMs and support to the Office of the Youth Envoy throughout their tenure.'<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, youth peacebuilders and youth focal persons from the RECs and RMs attending the virtual inaugural General Youth Assembly hosted by the Y4P Africa Program in December 2021 expressed satisfaction with the AYAPs.<sup>5</sup> The general feedback from the session was that the AYAPs' performances were notable, being generally in line with the continental study, the CFYPS and the aspirations of young people in their respective regions. They noted that these achievements were even more appreciated due to the rather sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with the unprecedented difficulties occasioned by and associated with it.

Finally, the AYAPs' self-assessment of their tenure revealed that they experienced a remarkable process of growth and learning which enabled them to understand better the efforts of the AU and its partners in involving young people in its decision making. They also averred that the opportunity enabled them to meet, engage and network with a broad spectrum of highly talented young people whose contributions to promoting peace and security may not have received attention within

high-level policymakers at the national, regional and continental levels.

In the final analysis, the experience over the two-year tenure of the first cohort of AYAPs could be viewed as a win-win for all stakeholders: the youth ambassadors, youth peacebuilders and their constituency, policymakers at different levels, and the communities within which they deployed their skills and competences.

## The actions of the AYAPs facilitated meaningful and robust engagement with the broader youth constituency

### Conclusion

There has been considerable progress in initiatives to mainstream youth into peace and security at the continental level, with the AU ensuring that the requisite standards and institutional frameworks are in place for RECs/RMs, member states and youth to build upon.

The evolution and mainstreaming of YPS within the AU's peace and security agenda has led to an increased and continuing involvement of various levels of the AU, including most notably that of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government and the PSC, to play critical roles in advancing practical measures to mainstream and deepen active youth participation in Africa's peace and security field. These normative developments have, in turn, had a positive impact on the capacity of AYAPs to contribute to shaping the mandates and priorities of subsequent AYAPs.

With the benefit of hindsight, the appointment of the AYAPs is momentous as it has given practical expression to the growing recognition of the potential role and contributions the continent's youth make to peace and security in Africa. The discussion here which highlighted the progress made in the YPS arena and

the contributions of the first cohort of AYAPs particularly indicates that young people are better placed to continue to progressively break barriers that previously hindered youth inclusion and participation in peace and security.

Besides contributing to the growing recognition and visibility of youth peacebuilders and their networks, the actions of the AYAPs facilitated meaningful and robust engagement with the broader youth constituency at national, regional and continental levels as well as aiding cross-sectoral cooperation to overcome some of the barriers to effective youth participation.

Without doubt, there is room to make further advancements to ensure the sustainability of the initiative and optimise contributions to advance YPS in Africa, as indicated in the recommendations section. It is important that the lessons learned from this experience shape the current (second) cohort of AYAPs and future iterations.

However, broadly speaking, it is important that subsequent AYAPs be given the opportunity to collaborate with key stakeholders within and beyond the continent and take advantage of the milestones already reached to work towards the sustainability of the YPS mandate in Africa.

### Notes

- 1 R Ako, M Ukpanah, O Ibrahim and H Mamo, Mainstreaming youth into AU's peace and security agenda, *ISS Policy Brief* 144, 2020, [https://media.africaportal.org/documents/Mainstreaming\\_youth\\_into\\_AUs\\_peace\\_and\\_security\\_agenda.pdf](https://media.africaportal.org/documents/Mainstreaming_youth_into_AUs_peace_and_security_agenda.pdf).
- 2 African Union Commission, Continental Framework for Youth, Peace and Security, 2020, <https://au.int/en/documents/20200821/continental-framework-youth-peace-and-security>.
- 3 See G Keng, C Ukeje and R Ako, COVID-19 and Peacebuilding in Africa: Youth, Resilience and Innovation Options, *ACCORD Policy and Practice Brief* #055, 2021, [www.accord.org.za/publication/covid-19-and-peacebuilding-in-africa/](http://www.accord.org.za/publication/covid-19-and-peacebuilding-in-africa/).
- 4 AU PSC Communiqué PSC/PR/COMM 1067 adopted by the Peace and Security Council of the African Union at its 1067<sup>th</sup> meeting held on 3 March 2022 on the theme: 'Youth, Peace and Security in Africa'.
- 5 The main objective of the Assembly was for the Y4P team, including the first cohort of AYAPs, to give an update on their activities and introduce the incoming second cohort of AYAPs.

## About the authors

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