

G20 Interfaith Forum Policy Brief

Policy Area: Youth

August 2021

ABSTRACT

The United Nations Security Council adopted unanimously that “young people play an important and positive role in the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security” on December 9, 2015. In subsequent years, the G20 has recognized the role that young people play, with the 2020 G20 Presidency Agenda highlighting that “the G20 should be forward – looking and adopt a long-term approach to pave the way for the future generations.”

This brief highlights youth-centered recommendations to integrate with the key themes and topics of the 2021 G20 Summit, from the perspectives of young interfaith leaders from around the globe.

The G20 Interfaith Forum (IF20) is a consultative process that seeks to weave interfaith insight and faith perspectives into practicable policy recommendations to the G20 (<https://www.g20interfaith.org>). A Common Word Among the Youth is a global youth movement that brings together young people from a multitude of backgrounds to increase understanding of different cultures and faiths, promote peace and coexistence, by delivering local community activities. Since its launch in December 2015, ACWAY fellows have delivered over 200 interfaith and intercultural activities, ranging from educational seminars to peace walks, national conferences and media campaigns.

ACWAY has organized five forums to date: four in-person international forums in Morocco, Australia, Sudan, and Azerbaijan and one online international forum for the UN World Interfaith Harmony Week in February 2021. ACWAY is also the Global Youth partner to the G20 Interfaith Forum and Chairs the Youth Working Group of the G20IF. From July 2020 to June 2021, ACWAY has been working on creating a policy brief that outlines challenges faced by young people around the world, and practical policy-centered recommendations to address them. The consultation process began with a global call for submissions, in which young interfaith leaders were asked to submit the most pressing challenges in their communities, along with potential solutions. After that, a second consultation was held during the ACWAY Youth Forum in February 2021, in which the G20 Interfaith Forum and ACWAY hosted a youth-specific focus group of 75 young people, collecting multiple perspectives on further recommendations.

Controlled Circulation

Currently, this brief outlines several policy areas including: access to education, stable employment, mental health, youth in conflict zones, climate change, and access to the decision making processes. ACWAY also presents the Interfaith Development Goals as a recommendation to be adopted by all G20 member states as a tool to monitor and measure interfaith impact in the sector.

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THE CHALLENGE

According to the latest United Nations estimates of the world's population, over 16 percent of the global population (1.2 billion) is aged 15 to 24¹. The sheer size of this group as well as their rising contribution to the economic, social and political well being of the world's future make youth a crucial partner to sustainable development. They are key if we are to achieve inclusive and stable societies; resolve and avoid conflicts, combat the threats of climate change; avoid economic instability; address gender inequity and respond humanely to forced migration.

A number of persistent obstacles need to be overcome if we are to draw upon the contribution youth can make to resolve our global challenges. These include, poor access to education, unstable employment, increasing mental health issues, ongoing conflicts, climate change and access to decision making processes.

Access to education

142 million youth of upper secondary age are out of school, with upper secondary enrollment rates averaging only 14% in low income countries. Almost 30% of the poorest 12-14 year olds have never attended any form of school, with many unable to receive any primary education. Young women are disproportionately challenged with obtaining and completing educational

¹ Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. UN International Youth Day - Key messages (2019): www.un.org/development/desa/youth/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2019/08/WYP2019_10-Key-Messages_GZ_8AUG19.pdf.

opportunities.²The COVID-19 pandemic has widened these gaps even more³, unmasking additional forms of discrimination, stigmatization and exclusion that marginalize children and young people.⁴ According to a survey conducted through the Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth, over 73% of those surveyed experienced school closures and were not all able to transition into online and distance learning. COVID-19 has left one in eight young people without any access to courses, teaching or training. This unequal access to technology-based and online learning platforms and resources also amplifies the disparities in access to education between regions. Gender inequalities in education are more exposed during the COVID-19 outbreak, when domestic and household chores can prevent girls from accessing sufficient learning time.⁵ Children and young people with disabilities experience a disproportionate impact as well.⁶

Stable employment

Access to stable employment for young people is also challenging. Between 1997 and 2017, the youth population grew by 139 million, while the youth labor force shrank by 35 million. An estimated 70.9 million young people were unemployed globally in 2017 and this number is rising.⁷ With the emergence of COVID-19, young people are likely to suffer long lasting impacts both socially and economically. The pandemic has destroyed employment opportunities on young workers - with one in six young people who were employed before the outbreak have now stopped work altogether. Two out of five young people reported a reduction in their income, and young people in lower income countries are the most exposed to reduction in working hours.⁵

Mental health

With an indefinite disruption in working and learning opportunities, young people are also facing a health crisis in their deteriorating mental health. The study found that 17% of young people were likely affected by anxiety or depression, especially from ages 18 to 24. Young people also reported an indirect impact on their freedom of movement - with one in three noticed an impact in their right to participate in public affairs, while over a quarter experienced difficulty in exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. A loss of movement and right to practice in public affairs or

² United Nations World Youth Report: Youth and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2018): www.un.org/development/desa/youth/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2018/12/Executive-Summary_World-Youth-Report_07.12.18-1.pdf.

³ UNESCO (2020) “Half of world’s student population not attending school: UNESCO launches global coalition to accelerate deployment of remote learning solutions”: <https://en.unesco.org/news/half-worlds-student-population-not-attending-school-unesco-launches-global-coalition-accelerate>

⁴ Bhat, S., & Talreja, V. (2020) “Kindness is the New Normal –3- part series”: <https://medium.com/weavinglab/kindness-is-the-new-normal-in-a-post-covid-world-part-1-2cd563a864f0>

⁵ UNESCO (2020) “COVID-19 school closures: Why girls are more at risk”: <http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/COVID-19-school-closures-why-girls-are-more-risk-13406>; “Keeping girls in the picture”, available at <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/girlseducation>

⁶ UNESCO (2020) “Including learners with disabilities in COVID-19 education responses”: <https://en.unesco.org/news/including-learners-disabilities-covid-19-education-responses>

⁷ ILO (2017) Global Employment Trends for Youth: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_598669.pdf

engage in one's faith community has exacerbated mental health issues among young people. The COVID-19 pandemic and inability to attend schools lead to increased levels of physical and psychological abuse, mental ill-being⁸ and sexual abuse towards girls.

Youth in conflict zones

More than 600 million young people live in fragile and conflict-affected countries and territories.⁹ Conflicts create conditions that often combine the various challenges youth face today. Conflicts leave future generations with decreased access to education and employment, and deteriorated economic and social structures. During conflict, weakened institutions, poverty and financial hardship leave adolescent girls vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and violence.¹⁰

Climate change

The younger generation today is a driving force for a timely response to global warming, because they are the generation whose future will be most impacted by the impacts of climate change. Some 89% of youth respondents say young people can make a difference on climate change¹¹. However only 9% of youth are very confident the world will act quickly enough to address climate change¹². This 80% gap between aspirations and perceptions of reality ones more highlights the need for policymakers and leaders to draw upon young people as key actors of change.

Access to Decision-making Processes

Despite socioeconomic challenges further exacerbated by the pandemic, young people remain committed to stepping up and partnering safely and effectively with civil society, social actors, and government institutions. According to a UN report, over in one in four young people reported actively engaging in volunteerism and in making donations towards COVID-19 response efforts. Young people went on to call on governments to continue enforcing containment measures, such as working from home whenever possible.

It is common for practitioners, governments, and faith leaders to draw upon their own knowledge and expertise to make recommendations to address the issues youth encounter. Yet, too frequently, this process does not seek the target beneficiaries' input. This process weakens the effectiveness of policy development and project implementations.

The views of young people should be respected and given their due weight. Creating proper spaces for participation and involving young people in decision-making processes through focus groups

⁸ UNICEF (2009) Child Friendly Schools, New York: United Nations Children's Fund; UNICEF (2020) "Impacts of Pandemics and Epidemics on Child Protection Lessons learned from a rapid review in the context of COVID-19": <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/WP-2020-05-Working-Paper-Impacts-Pandemics-Child-Protection.pdf>

⁹ United Nations Development Programme Youth Strategy 2014-2017 Available at <http://goo.gl/d6jjTE>

¹⁰ Women's Refugee Commission, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1J666EM>

¹¹ UNEP, GlobeScan Survey, 2008

¹² UNEP, GlobeScan Survey, 2008

and surveys will not only build trust and empower them to feel as if they're important members of a community, but it will also help the 'elders' better understand their needs and the issues that they are facing. The benefits of youth participation are countless, and young people being acknowledged for their contributions is what can make participation viable for any child/youth-related challenge that needs to be solved.

FAITH DIMENSIONS RELATED TO CHALLENGES

The following section highlights specific areas of faith and cultural dimensions related to the challenges aforementioned above. This section is meant to provide more context and recommendations to the areas in which G20 member states can actively create more inclusive policies to address the presented challenges.

Youth Empowerment, Education and Social Media

Youth access to education contains a central challenge for the future: not only must young people have access to education, but those educational institutions and spaces must allow various cultural expressions to coexist and to promote dialogue so as to foster a peaceful society. This issue is critically prevalent in a world where people are discriminated against because of faith, belief or association with a specific religion or with someone of a specific religion, thereby encouraging many young people today to hold prejudices and to lose belief in religion.

The rise of social media as a means for delivering news and access to education has been amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic. While social media platforms have been used as a platform to promote misinformation and derision, young people are using these same platforms to spread peace and dialogue practices across the globe. Best practices are easily shared through grassroots networks of young people and young change agents that build strong and well-connected constellations of partnership. They provide innovative approaches to peace-building that are both easily shareable and quantifiable online. Religious institutions, faith communities and interfaith networks have been pivotal in reaching to the excluded, caring for the vulnerable, and encouraging equality in education.¹³ International dialogue programs like A Common Word Among the Youth (ACWAY)¹⁴ bring together youth leaders from faith communities to exchange best practices in peace building and leadership.

¹³ Harvard University (2017) "A Bridge Between School and Faith: Young people often have strong ties to faith communities. Can schools leverage those assets?": <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/17/10/bridge-between-school-and-faith>

¹⁴ A Common Word Among the Youth: www.acway.org

Youth mental health

During the pandemic, numerous faith-inspired initiatives have been implemented to bring financial and psychological relief to local communities. Youth volunteerism is on the rise as a strong evidence of willingness to act in sustaining and re-building societies. International interfaith institutions and organizations also have taken an active role in helping those at risk engaging multiple stakeholders. For example, Religions for Peace, UNICEF, launched a multi-religious Faith-in-Action COVID-19 Campaign to involve religious leaders in global responses to the crisis.¹⁵ A Common Word Among the Youth (ACWAY), as an interfaith and intercultural international youth organization, offered a series of webinars to its members - youth leaders to ensure their wellbeing and safe space for communication and inspiration.

Youth in conflict zones

Ignorance about the “Religious Other”

In the wake of the current global climate of fear, insecurities, and intolerance, it is safe to assert that religion can be both an inciter of conflict and a facilitator of peace. Young people across the globe are both significant actors in extremist groups and essential leaders in combating the same. Dialogue is key to engaging young people and ensuring that young people are positively integrated into social systems that promote coexistence and economic mobility.

One of the hindrances on the path to dialogue is ignorance about the “religious other”. Questions of identities will always be characterized by tension, however, the conflict of “the other” continues to be a perennial issue. Much of the conflict in today’s world happens because a person does not know or understand “the other”. Religions, by their very nature, may not be prone to be open to the “other”; however, in times where encountering diversity is no more a choice, but a common fact of life, it is almost necessary that we endeavor to know and understand “the other”. From hate speech to violent hate crimes in everyday lives are becoming mundane because there is a lack of knowledge about “the other”. Social media, a tool completely at the discretion of the user, can be used in productive ways or destructive manners. Young people should be educated about inter and multifaith realities, and should have the platform and exposure to be educated about their own faith and the faith of the others. Formal and non-formal education institutes should collaborate in installing mechanisms in place where the youth are aware of themselves and the “other”. Ignorance should be addressed, because when left unattended, this turns into prejudice that looms mistrust and fear, which in turn can transform into hatred.

¹⁵ UNICEF (2020) <https://www.unicef.org/northmacedonia/press-releases/launch-global-multi-religious-faith-action-covid-19-initiative>

RECOMMENDATIONS

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 (UNSCR 2250) emphasizes the importance of youth as agents of change in the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. In line with the G20 presidential agenda 2020 we believe that G20 should be forward-looking and adopt a long-term approach to pave the way for the future generations.

We present below several recommendations that were inspired by The Interfaith Development Goals¹⁶ (IDGs) developed by ACWAY in order to fill the gap in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to inter-religious and intercultural peacebuilding. The IDGs were developed in 2016, to capture and demonstrate how religious, faith, spiritual and interfaith groups, their communities and leaders can contribute to building peace and harmony around the world.

Promote inclusive education

We know that the most important sources of information about religions and worldviews are the family and school. Therefore, there is a need for discrete policies at the national, sub-national, and community level – especially when it comes to religious education and awareness in educational institutions.

Education should value religious diversity through the following actions (a) develop interactive approaches where students can learn about religious heterogeneity and create opportunities for meaningful discussion (b) train educators in methods that support and encourage students to engage personal experience through the activities (c) develop tools that help to define and combat hate speech in school environment, including online learning platforms. ACWAY's Interfaith Development Goal 6 argues for, "Access to Interfaith Education and Religious Literacy." This is to "raise cultural and religious awareness and promote religious literacy in multiple fora to develop an understanding for the "Other" and work against prejudice and ignorance," including formal and informal education contexts.

Religious groups can rise to meet intercultural and interfaith challenges in a unique way by fostering accurate and respectful information about other faiths. As the Congregation for Catholic Education in Institutes of Study points out, approaches to this challenge can be articulated in such a way that facilitates multicultural educational opportunities while still maintaining one's faith identity and faith-based pedagogy.¹⁷ These aims are achieved in various stages: (1) discovering the multicultural nature of one's own situation; (2) overcoming prejudices by living and working in harmony; and (3) educating oneself "by means of the other" to a global vision and a sense of

¹⁶ See full list of Interfaith Development Goals (IDGs) in the Appendix below on page 10

¹⁷ Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools: Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love (2013): <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=10612>

citizenship. Fostering encounters between different people helps to create mutual understanding, although it ought not to mean a loss of one's own identity.

Inclusion of Youth in decision making

Abovementioned statistics show the gap between aspirations and perceptions of youth, where the majority of youth admits the urgency to act on global peace and security issues while less than 10% believes that the policy makers will be able to act timely and effectively. Statistics also show that during crisis, youth activism and volunteerism is on the rise. Therefore, there is an evident need for policymakers and leaders to draw upon young people as key actors in raising awareness, running educational programmes, promoting sustainable lifestyles, conserving nature, supporting renewable energy, adopting environmentally-friendly practices and implementing adaptation and mitigation projects.

Interfaith Development Goal 4 addresses intergenerational engagement defined to “stimulate youth engagement in interfaith and intercultural activities towards fostering cross-cultural understanding.” Strategies include enabling youth to build bridges with their own tools and innovations to foster dialogue and acknowledge the contribution of youth in existing programs to encourage them to work sustainably. Programs should be accessible and inclusive in their design, meant to engage in practices that will enhance the freedom of expression in interfaith work.

Use religion (and cultural identities) as a tool for peace building

It is important to consider religious/faith organizations as part of civil society and call on them to play an active role in the pursuit of peace and solidarity. G20 member states are advised to continue to uphold the peacemaking potential of religions, faith and spiritual communities.

Faith communities must encourage accurate and respectful education about other faith and cultural traditions in order to de-escalate conflict and promote knowledge and understanding of “the religious other.” Religious affiliation should never be used neither as a justification, nor scapegoated as a reason for war, violence and discrimination¹⁸.

*Encourage peace dialogue and peaceful co-existence*¹⁹

At a national level, it is significant to encourage dialogue and provide opportunities for engagement across religious lines. For example, endorsement of peace dialogue through mass media, dialogue events, fora and conferences with open discussion, and cultural exchange activities are ways nations can encourage peace dialogue and peaceful co-existence. These initiatives raise awareness of religious worldviews, demonstrate ways to co-exist and place peace as a priority. States should consider to proactively create environments for young people in which

¹⁸ Interfaith Development Goal 8, ACWAY IDGs, see Appendix below

¹⁹ Interfaith Development Goal 2, ACWAY IDGs, see Appendix below

positive interactions can develop and provide sustainable programmes for training on interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding

*Counter misinterpretation and misappropriation of religions through active tolerance*²⁰

It is crucial for the G20 nations to focus on tolerance through taking a stance against the stereotypical images or representations of religions. This can be emphasized by clarifying and strengthening laws & regulations that define tolerance, supporting the justice system to enforce these laws, and promoting preventive actions & remedies.

Promote collaboration with non-religious actors

In order to tackle pressing issues of our time such as climate change, countries shall encourage strong partnerships of religious and faith communities with national, international and civil society organizations to address religious and non-religious related issues.²¹ Such intersectoral approaches will help to tackle misunderstandings, foster cooperation and create a joint plan of action.

CONCLUSION

The key recommendation is to develop policies that protect, integrate, and develop young, especially in the interreligious and interfaith sector. This includes urgent and targeted investments in decent jobs for youth, employment and job training programs, social protection (including cultural, ethnic, and religious), greater efforts to boost the quality and delivery of online/distance learning, stronger mental health resources, and the creation of and investment in programs and partnerships that combat the threats of climate change.

In conclusion, we call on G20 leaders to focus greater attention to children and youth rights and protections, translating policies into practice. Youth participation in local faith communities and civil society movements can yield more sustainable and intergenerational impact.

We present the Interfaith Development Goals and advocate for adopting these by all states as a means to provide a unified vision and direction for achieving common goals in interreligious work.

²⁰ Interfaith Development Goal 3., ACWAY IDGs, see Appendix below

²¹ Interfaith Development Goal 7, ACWAY IDGs, see Appendix below

APPENDIX**Interfaith Development Goals**
(ACWAY IDGs)**Introductory statement**

The Interfaith Development Goals are intended to complement the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) where we, the young people of A Common Word Among the Youth (ACWAY), saw a gap. UN SDG16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) addresses essentially political and human rights issues; *abuse, exploitation, trafficking, promoting the rule of law, reducing illicit financial and arms flows, reducing corruption and bribery*, but it does not address inter religious and intercultural peace building.

The IDGs were developed in 2016 to capture and demonstrate how religious, faith, spiritual and interfaith groups, their communities and leaders contribute to building peace and harmony around the world.

ACWAY consists of young people from more than 80 countries around the world, promoting interreligious and intercultural peace and understanding. These IDGS were developed over two and half years by young people with support from senior leaders.

We call on religious, faith, spiritual and interfaith communities and organizations to adopt these IDGs and to implement them in their local, national and international work.

Goal 1- Strong Interfaith Cooperation

Promote cooperation among cultural groups and different religions on matters of common interest.

Strategies

- 1.1 Promote and support platforms where different religions and faiths can address matters of common interest;
- 1.2 Foster cooperation between various societal groups affected by and concerned with interfaith harmony;
- 1.3 Nurture respect and dialogue in environments of diversity of belief and thought.

Goal 2 - Peace through Dialogue

Promote interfaith and intercultural dialogue as a means towards conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

Strategies

- 2.1 Engage religious, cultural and community leaders in the promotion of respect towards different religious or ethnic groups by direct outreach to community members;
- 2.2 Support interfaith activism and use positive traditional narratives as a reminder of a given group's values during turbulent times, in order to prevent the escalation of the conflict;
- 2.3 Establish safe space in order to facilitate conversations between various communities in an atmosphere of openness and mutual respect to help resolve conflicts.

Goal 3 – Universal Freedom and Protection of Religion

Seek in any arena to uphold freedom and protection of thought and religious identity in every expression around the world.

Strategies

- 3.1 Develop yet unarticulated strategies to end discrimination based on religious ground and closely correlated with other human rights issues, such as age, race, sex, language, national or social origin, sexual orientation, political opinion or other status;
- 3.2 Promote existing rules established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to work against discrimination, taking into account the distinctions of each specific community and target group;
- 3.3 Increase awareness about discrimination at the grassroots level and foster a culture of zero tolerance for discrimination.

Goal 4 - Intergenerational Engagement

Stimulate youth engagement in interfaith and intercultural activities towards fostering cross-cultural understanding.

Strategies

- 4.1 Enable youth to build bridges with their own tools and innovations to foster dialogue and acknowledge the contribution of youth in existing programs to encourage them to work sustainably;
- 4.2 Enable access of young people to educational and social interfaith platforms;
- 4.3 Assemble and disseminate tools, frameworks, and guiding principles as a solid knowledge basis for intercultural competences for youth;
- 4.4 Arrange programs and events (e.g. fellowship and capacity building programs) to engage youth of diverse backgrounds, particularly in multicultural contexts, to analyze and implement responses on the pressing local and global issues;
- 4.5 Develop and engage in practices which will enhance the freedom of expression in interfaith work.

Goal 5 - Protection of Women's Dignity and Rights

Engage religious and spiritual communities in protection and empowerment of girls and women against violence and abuse.

Strategies

- 5.1 Empower people to addresses gender inequalities and violent mistreatment against girls and women in the name of religion;
- 5.2 Support the creation of initiatives and regional bodies that can work to protect the dignity and rights of religious and nonreligious girls and women;
- 5.3 Foster and encourage spaces where women can express their beliefs and needs, and safely exercise personal choices.

Goal 6 - Access to Interfaith Education and Religious Literacy

Raise cultural and religious awareness and promote religious literacy in multiple forums to develop an understanding for the Other and work against prejudice and ignorance.

Strategies

- 6.1 Strengthen the understanding of one's own religion, as well as others, within religious spaces and houses of worship;
- 6.2 Promote religious/cultural understanding and literacy in formal and informal educational contexts through field trips, student exchange programs, cultural events, seminars, dialogues, etc.

Goal 7 - Cooperation with Non-Religious Actors

Promote collaboration with non-religious actors to foster greater understanding and mutual cooperation to tackle pressing issues of our time.

Strategies

- 7.1 Work towards strong partnerships with national, international and civil society organizations to address religious and non-religious related issues;
- 7.2 Share platforms such that all stakeholders are included as serious actors when addressing common issues.

Goal 8 - Religion as a Tool for Peace

Engage in the education and interpretation of religious, spiritual and faith communities as historic and inexhaustible foundations for the theory and practice of peace. Religion is neither used as a justification, nor scapegoated as a reason for war, violence and discrimination.

Strategies

- 8.1 Continue to uphold the peacemaking potential of religions, faith and spiritual communities;

8.2 Seek to unmask the appropriation of religious, faith or spiritual communities and principles for political ends;

8.3 Strengthen the members of religious, faith and spiritual communities in their understanding that religion is an empowering tool to resist violence and provide assistance in making known those who already promote peacemaking and development through their doctrines and practices

Goal 9 - Recognition and Protection of Religious and Ethnic Minorities and Vulnerable Groups

Encourage religious, faith or spiritual communities to recognize and protect national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, as well as vulnerable groups and differently abled persons.

Strategies

9.1 Engage religious leaders in the promotion of respect towards persons and communities belonging to minorities;

9.2 Promote awareness about the particular challenges and prejudices faced by minorities;

9.3 Encourage the participation of minorities in interfaith forums.

Goal 10 - Respect for Religious, Faith and Spiritual Symbols and Places

Ensure treatment of religious, faith and spiritual symbols with respect and sanctity. Collaborate between religions and faiths to protect spiritual and religious symbols, houses of faith and worship, and sanctuaries.

Strategies

10.1 Encourage the acknowledgement, respect and protection of the symbols of the entire human community;

10.2 Collaborate in the protection of each other's holy symbols, places and languages;

10.3 Strengthen the importance of their protection in non-religious forums and secular societies.

10.4 Promote respect for differences by providing young people with a safe space for dialogue and a counternarrative to hate speech