

Global youth must be empowered to combat terrorism, UN forum declares

Young people are prime targets of extremist recruiters but they can also play leadership roles in fighting terrorism and creating greater opportunities for all, said speakers at a United Nations forum on Thursday called 'Investing in Youth to Counter Terrorism.'

"I do not agree that young people are the leaders of tomorrow. More and more, they are the [leaders of today](#)," [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) told the event.

"I thank all the young women and men who are stepping up and assuming those responsibilities," he added.

"Nearly half the world's population – 46 per cent – is 24 years-old or younger," Mr. Guterres said. "Africa and the Middle East have the highest proportions of young people."

The radicalization of young people is a source of deep concern in rich and poor countries alike, as poisonous ideas flow across borders at the touch of a button or the tap of a tweet.

Terrorist groups exploit social, economic and political injustices to entice young people through false propaganda that glorifies distorted ideologies, while unscrupulous recruiters using social media to lure unsuspecting teenagers down dangerous roads.

Mr. Guterres observed that "violent extremist groups target and invest in young people because they are aware of their potential and their strong desire for change."

For her part, the Secretary-General's [Envoy on Youth](#), Jayathma Wickramanayake, asserted, "the fact is, the vast majority of youth are peaceful, and are not in danger of participating in violence."

"On the contrary," she continued, "young people's resilience is transforming local communities while combating extremist movements."



UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

Jayathma Wickramanayake, Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, addresses the special event on "Investing in Youth to Counter Terrorism."

Discussions at the event at UN Headquarters in New York centered on meeting the needs of youth at risk of disempowerment and alienation – making them susceptible to extremist narratives and recruitment.

"If we are serious about prevention, and particularly about preventing conflict, we need to be serious about engaging with and investing in young women and men," underscored the UN chief.

"We need their involvement and commitment, if we are to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)), take effective action on climate change, and create a safer and more peaceful world," he continued.

Both the [Security Council](#) and the [General Assembly](#) have also recognized the importance of engaging youth, and continue seeking ways for their inclusive representation in decision-making in local, national, regional and international institutions.

A place at the table

An overarching theme of Thursday's meeting was the need to include young people in efforts to prevent and resolve conflict, including violent extremism.

In calling for the engagement of young people, Mr. Guterres described their main needs as: "Education, jobs, and vocational training. Investment, interest, role models and goals. Meaningful participation in decisions that affect them."

He emphasized that youth have a voice and a place at the table, adding: "More than that, we must be prepared to go to their table, sit down and listen."

The joint event was sponsored by the Permanent Missions of Norway and Pakistan and the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism ([UNOCT](#)). That office assists Member States in strengthening their capacities to combat terrorism and ensures that counter-terrorism remains a priority across the Organization, in accordance with the [UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy](#).