Introduction

Hearing and Seeing Young People in Peace and Conflict: Lessons from and for the Practice of Reconciliation

> Young people around the world are striving for peace, justice, inclusion, gender equality and human rights. Their aspirations, views and demands need to be heard . . . and their plight addressed.
>
> —UN Security Council, Resolution 2250

Strolling down a street in Honiara, Solomon Islands, one sunny afternoon in November 2015, I hear the pounding of drums and the strums of electric guitars begin to fill the air. As I follow the upbeat and melodic rhythms, I come across the National Art Gallery precinct, which today is adorned with bright colored banners announcing and welcoming the Solomon Islands community to the monthly youth markets. Surrounding the stage, where a band of youth artists are playing original soft rock tunes, reggae, and pop hits, are stalls selling arts and crafts, food, and magazines. Established by Youth@Work, a local organization hosted by the secretariat of the Pacific Community until it was handed over to the Solomon Islands government in 2019, these markets and Youth@Work programs are led largely by youth and for youth. As such, they reflect of model of substantive participation where youth demonstrate not only agency but ownership over their stories and community interactions.

The precinct is filled with people young and old, dancing joyfully, eating, talking, and laughing, all while watching local youth artists complete their masterpieces and their livelihoods. Responsibility for these stalls, the business plans that established them, and the markets

1

themselves reside with Solomon Islander youth. Brightly colored knitted bags, homemade beauty and bath products, and printed T-shirts are displayed and sold with pride by youth who self-identify as entrepreneurs, business owners, and productive stakeholders in the (re)building and development of the Solomon Islands following the Tensions.[1] These markets, and the opportunities they enabled for substantive participation, illustrate the realm of the possible with respect to the political and public engagement of youth in the reconciliation and restoration of a nation following violence and instability.

Following my initial visit, I returned several more times to observe the interactions and to speak with youth about the role these markets played in their lives. Among the most notable insights provided by youth was the varied perspectives on how these markets contributed to their capacity to recast their role in the community following the Tensions. As Nelson Robridge Legua, a youth entrepreneur who sold his printed shirts at the markets, explained, these public spaces are an important opportunity for Solomon Islander youth to "take a shot, showcase our talents." A "time to open up"[2] to the community. As such, for many these youth markets, and the possibilities for economic empowerment they enable, illustrate the significance of thinking beyond simply institutional settings for the realization of inclusive justice. Within transitional communities still grappling with the legacies of past conflict, and youth's participation as key stakeholders to the violence and subsequent attempt to pursue peace and justice, it is critical that mechanisms and strategies for justice and peacebuilding are spaces where youth can challenge perceptions of their capacity and claim ownership of their experience via visibility, storytelling, and community participation.

Many young people I spoke with highlighted the importance of the markets for development and economic opportunity. In addition, they stressed that the outcomes from these markets could potentially act as a panacea for entrenched interpersonal and intergenerational challenges. As Sandra Barlett, program director of Youth@Work, explained, this program when coupled with Graduate Youth Entrepreneurship "gives youth a start . . . training them in business skills and providing them with startup capital" during a time when the community has "run out of jobs."[3] The association with interpersonal reconciliation is similarly reflected in the theme of the 2016 markets, "solidarity through culture,"[4] which highlighted the importance of creating substantive opportunities

for *all* Solomon Islanders to come together across generations and youth's leadership role in the activities central to this pursuit of solidarity.

During my visits, youth's ownership over their stories and their participatory capacity was on full display. While busy selling, many also took time to interact, learn, and narrate their experiences of being young in the Solomon Islands (the opportunities and the challenges), not just with peers but with elders and visitors. What was immediately evident was that their stories had been profoundly shaped, both inadvertently and directly, by the Tensions and subsequent efforts to pursue reconciliation and justice. As one young stallholder explained: The Tensions "was very bad for young people . . . but I am doing ok now . . . slowly rebuilding, although the Trauma it is still there. But you must take these opportunities . . . as time to show what you can do, where you are from."[5] A similar story was shared by a young musician who reflected that following the Tensions "the country is still finding its feet and figuring out where youth fit within the system. Progress is being made but there is conflict between the old system and the new development culture. But the more training, the more opportunities to show I am participating, means I get respect from 'big men' (older generations: Chiefs) in my community."[6]

Notably, these markets were essential sites for bonding and (re) building interpersonal relationships between youth and the wider community. This sentiment was highlighted by a participant in the 2015 Graduate Youth Entrepreneurship program: "The Solomon Islander youth, we work hard to be in this program. It is for the whole community, and the community likes to be involved with us, providing us with work placements and supporting our fairs and stalls. It is an opportunity to show our skills."[7] Through substantive participation at these markets youth publicly demonstrated their capacity to take ownership of their livelihoods and thus to contribute to the community. What was immediately evident was that exposure to youth's substantive participatory capacity was instrumental for the realization of interpersonal reconciliation. As Bartlett explains, "The big success, the social change success, is that we've put youth development on people's minds. In Solomons, it was always, youth are a problem, youth are a time bomb . . . but now they see that youth are doing things."[8]

The importance of seeing youth must not be overstated. As illustrated by the example of the youth markets in the Solomon Islands

and across the various interactions of young people with Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) throughout this book, inclusive justice necessitates processes where youth are not merely seen and heard. Communities emerging from conflict and grappling with the legacies of human rights violations through transitional justice processes must also create spaces where youth's experiences, and the meaning they ascribe to them, are taken seriously. As such, for transitional justice practices to be substantively inclusive of youth as autonomous political agents they need to acknowledge and create opportunities for youth empowerment.

Indeed, as one youth entrepreneur suggested, "Youth can either be empowered to help healing and problem-solving or they can continue to be influenced and disenabled by the effects of the conflict, such as disruption of education and family problems. We promote local culture through youth products and local *kaikai* and the use of village structures to incorporate and promote youth."[9] Agency and ownership were visible and taken seriously because of the youth's participation and leadership in the development and implementation of these markets. As such, their actions in this public, noninstitutionalized space challenged deeply embedded, marginalizing perceptions of youth that resonate throughout the community. These markets and youth's stories and experiences that emerge from them are reflective of the tension and synergy surrounding substantive youth participation in transitional justice contexts. Before turning to the stories of youth in reconciliation, and their substantive participation, it is important to situate their storytelling agency within broader discourses of engagement with youth themselves as autonomous political agents.

Situating Youth as Substantive, Autonomous Political Agents

On December 9, 2015, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS). This landmark resolution reflected a turning point in how the international community understood its relationship with young people, institutionally acknowledging their contributions as active stakeholders in the outcomes of post-conflict practices.[10] Central to this discursive evolution was the affirmation that youth play an "important role . . . in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and the sustainability, inclusiveness and

success" of post-conflict practices; thus they should be empowered to lead and make decisions on their development.[11] Resolution 2250 compelled international actors, states, and youth to establish partnerships for the development of inclusive post-conflict practices. While this resolution was the first to codify recognition of the importance of young people's engagement for sustainable peace, the normative discourse has been slowly evolving since the 1990s. This evolution is due in part to the on-the-ground advocacy of young people, which has sought to challenge the status quo and reframe their interactions with practices in the peacebuilding and transitional justice fields.

Ideational evolution does not occur in a vacuum; it is informed by the external environment in which it exists, namely the social, political, and cultural conditions that create the milieu. Recognition that young people are active agents striving for peace and justice is the result of decades of youth advocacy and leadership in the development of informal peacebuilding practices. In addition, recognition of their political agency and their role as knowledge producers is informed by the stories young people share during reconciliation practices. These stories and the processes for telling them are central to the ideas presented in this book.

UN Resolution 2250 and subsequent YPS Resolutions 2249 (2018) and 2535 (2020) affirm what two decades of evolution in the relationships between young people and formal TRC processes revealed. Both demonstrate that young people "should be actively engaged in shaping lasting peace and contributing to justice and reconciliation" within the formal peace architecture. Also evident is the importance of informal reconciliation practices designed and implemented by youth to pursue justice alongside these formal institutions. Restoring trust and ensuring meaningful accountability through acknowledgment requires interactions between formal and informal sites of agency. This is particularly instrumental when the formal (often institutionalized) practices perpetuate conditions that limit the manifestation of agency and deny opportunities for ownership. Recognizing young people's capacity as political agents is critical for meaningful reconciliation. Attempts to end the culture of impunity within post-conflict states have a greater chance of lasting success when youth are empowered to substantively participate, as their contributions can produce a peace dividend.[12] In 2022, there were 1.85 billion young people (individuals between the ages of ten and twenty-four years old) in the world. Of these, 90 percent lived in developing countries and one in four have experienced violence

and instability. Inclusive practices, therefore, that promote ownership amongst this diverse and expansive community are critical for lasting peace and meaningful reconciliation.

Reconciliation facilitated through TRCs is increasingly viewed by the international community as expected practice for states emerging from violence and instability. This approach acknowledges the link between rebuilding trust within and between conflict-affected communities and the pursuit of justice and sustainable peace. Emphasizing the restoration of trust and interpersonal connections within society facilitates an expansive and forward-looking approach, and transitional justice aims for more than retributive (criminal) accountability for past violence. This approach to reconciliation recognizes the embeddedness of transitional justice practices within broad approaches to peacebuilding. Looking beyond the relationship between the perpetrator and the state when seeking justice for mass human rights violations is also critical to attaining sustainable peace because it acknowledges the widespread impact of conflict. As previous research surveying youth-inclusive practices suggests: "We pay so much attention to those who fought, and not enough to those who did not. This complicates reconciliation. Those who did not fight have to be recognized and appreciated but they are often ignored."[13] Valuing the experiences of a cross section of stakeholders within reconciliation acknowledges the importance of ownership and agency for sustainable peace. When young people's conflict stories are taken seriously, and they feel heard, there is more political will and buy-in for reconciliation and thus a greater likelihood of sustainable peace. Where young people are concerned, how post-conflict practices manage inclusion often determines the legitimacy of the process and their motivation to meaningfully engage.

Principles of inclusion are increasingly used by the international community and transitional governments as a marker for determining the success of reconciliation practices. Inclusive practices that center the decision-making capacity and leadership of traditionally marginalized individuals promote ownership amongst diverse stakeholders; thus they are integral for ideas about justice to be embedded within communities. They are also essential for the restoration of interpersonal relationships following violence and instability as they can facilitate greater trust of institutions and between individuals. Despite normative consensus that broader inclusion produces more responsive reconciliation practices, and the positive gains made toward greater visibility, the relationship

between young people and TRCs is often fraught with challenges and missed opportunities.

While the institutional discourses that inform the creation of TRCs have evolved over time to normalize the participation of young people, implementing meaningful engagement and exercising care over their stories has proven to be a persistent challenge. As the cases in this book demonstrate, these challenges are informed by constantly shifting political and social struggles that exist within post-conflict communities around attempts to define the character of young people's participation. The legacy of this tension between normative evolution and implementation is further reflected in attempts to operationalize the UN Resolution 2250 mandate for substantive inclusion. As the secretary general noted in 2020, despite evidence that meaningful inclusion facilitates transformative and sustainable peace agreements, youth continue to be left out of the room and excluded from decision-making.[14] Discussions of participation, therefore, need to consider more than just visibility or tokenistic representation.

Creating Substantive Participation

Advocacy for the creation and adoption of UN Resolution 2250 as a codified global framework was driven by civil society, particularly youth-led organizations.[15] In calling for an institutionalized approach to inclusion, youth advocates urged Member States to empower their substantive participation in formal post-conflict practices, including dispute resolutions strategies, peace agreement negotiations, and transitional justice mechanisms. This form of inclusiveness is understood as widespread involvement in leadership and decision-making for a cross section of post-conflict communities, including women and young people. Key to this form of inclusion is autonomous decision-making as well as the implementation of efforts that facilitate widespread youth participation. This therefore goes beyond the tokenistic "add youth and stir" approaches common to technocratic inclusion.[16]

Notions of substantive participation codified within Resolution 2250 promote an active and expansive role for young people, which draws on their leadership capacity and centers their voices in decision-making. It requires that Member States "consider ways to increase the inclusive representation of youth in decision-making at all levels in local,

national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflict."[17] Characterizations of participation that emphasize engagement with decision-making structures challenge long-standing discourses of passive involvement for young people, where their inclusion is piecemeal, selective, and mediated by powerful actors.

In the context of formal reconciliation, substantive participation should be determined by how the stories of young people are used within the conflict narrative. Furthermore, the character and location of young people throughout TRC processes is also instructive for assessing claims of meaningful participation. Creating networks and conditions for substantive participation has been a constant challenge for peace and conflict practices, including TRCs. Visibility, while important, denotes shallow participatory parameters and creates a cycle of exclusion that has the potential to undermine the institutions aims. Youth-led research reveals that to be meaningfully inclusive, practices within the peacebuilding and transitional justice fields must undergo "a paradigm shift in how [they] design and implement" strategies for peace and justice, "partnering with young people from the outset."[18] Youth advocates suggest that central to this idea is the notion that institutions within the formal peace architecture must work "*with* young people as critical partners . . . as opposed to inviting [them] as an add-on or to tick the box of participation."[19] Practices within the transitional justice field must undergo a similar discursive and practical shift.

Two decades of sporadic and piecemeal evolution in the character of young people's engagement with TRCs demonstrates what the secretary general affirmed in his report on the YPS agenda, that still "more needs to be done to create an enabling environment for young people in which they are seen and respected as citizens with equal rights, equal voices and equal influence."[20] As such, the development of an enabling environment that is responsive to young people's needs and experiences requires not only that we are mindful of local contexts but also that we learn from previous interactions between young people and formal institutions. The chapters in this book provide opportunities to reflect on how young people's engagement with TRCs has changed over time. More broadly, the stories of young people's interactions with these TRCs offer insights into the internal and external beliefs, traditions, and experiences that have informed how we understand notions of substantive participation today.

Understanding how young people's experiences are constructed in times of transition provides insight into the priorities of post-conflict communities. Within the peace and justice architecture of these states, actors often ascribe meaning to the conflict experiences of children and youth without considering the implications on their agency. Young people's stories have become central to the popular discourse on peace as they offer aspiration and a "promise of a progressive future" in times of instability and transition.[21] However, the stories of youth leadership in practices that seek to deal with legacies of past violence are often missing from these formalized tales as they challenge or complicate the political narrative agreed upon by governments and powerful stakeholders.

Absent also are the stories from young people that reflect a diverse and complex tapestry of conflict experiences. Instead, their voices in reconciliation practices are often imbued with political meaning to maintain the simplistic binaries that have long determined how political communities interact with them, namely as either victims or perpetrators (discussed further in chapter 2). This binary has permeated the popular frameworks of formal justice institutions and facilitates the maintenance of marginalizing technocratic processes based on traditional hierarchical power structures. By using young people's stories to construct a false binary, these power structures "erase and deny the multiple experiences" of those who exercise agency through their negotiations of "complex systems of risk and oppression" to act for peace and justice within their post-conflict communities.[22]

Calls by young people for institutions to recognize, represent, and take seriously the diversity of their conflict stories have grown increasingly loud. This advocacy is underpinned and supported by an emerging body of empirical youth-led research, which demonstrates that young people "play a critical role in the implementation" of post-conflict practice "due to their inevitable engagement in (re) building societal trust, social cohesion and leading reconciliation across generations."[23] Young people therefore must be empowered to exercise agency over their own stories. Exclusion from formal justice practices or managed practices that mediate their participation in the rooms where reconciliation narratives are created perpetuates a silence that impacts youth participation. This exclusion has the potential to generate deep mistrust amongst young people in the legitimacy of TRCs and the capacity of reconciliation processes to fulfill their potential for restoring

substantive and positive relationships between young people and the transitional community.

Since its emergence the YPS agenda has focused attention on the importance of centering young people, letting them tell their stories and empowering them to explain what their experiences mean for them. Cycles of exclusion from peace and justice processes are endemic for young people; young people are consistently spoken about rather than spoken to, which leads them to pursue other avenues of engagement outside these institutions. As noted in the 2018 assessment of youth's engagement with peace and security practices, "structural and collective dimensions of young peoples" victimization, vulnerabilities, and grievances must sit at the epicenter of strategies for addressing the marginalization young people experience when engaging with formal institutions.[24] Recounting young people's experiences within formal transitional justice practices therefore can either enable continued vulnerabilities or help to meaningfully resolve them.

Attention must be paid to children and youth's participation in transitional justice because the character of this engagement is central to the legitimacy of the institution for young people, their willingness to buy into and support the narratives constructed, and thus the capacity of these institutions to promote an enabling environment. Young people must be empowered to participate in these institutions and supported in attempts to create peace and justice practices that exist alongside them in informal spaces. While understanding how young people's stories evolve across formal institutions (such as TRCs) offers critical insights into strategies for substantive inclusion, these stories do not exist in a vacuum. As youth advocates explain, young people also "need to be recognized for the value of their informal contributions, as a critical bridge to formal peace" and justice processes.[25] Reconciliation practices occurring by and with young people on the margins are also important sites of agency and voice. While not exhaustive, the following examples offer opportunities to reveal the significance of youth-led justice strategies for meaningful reconciliation.

Young People Working for Reconciliation Outside Institutions

Advocacy efforts by youth in informal spaces demonstrate their potential to substantively contribute to formal reconciliation. It is increasingly acknowledged that young people occupy a significant role as transmitters

of historical memory to fulfill the "never again" promise of acknowledging past human rights abuses, a key mandate of transitional justice practices.[26] Informal spaces offer more opportunities for public engagement and thus facilitate collective buy-in for the aims of reconciliation. An emerging body of youth-led empirical research demonstrates that the initiatives developed by young people for reconciliation contribute substantively to the restoration of interpersonal relationships and accountability through acknowledgment in post-conflict communities.

In Colombia for example, young people have been instrumental in pursuing social acceptance and healing between the community and the guerrilla soldiers of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Following the failure of the referendum on the peace deal in 2016, due in part to the divisive nature of a proposal to reconcile with and reintegrate FARC soldiers, a group of young people began the Cartas por la Reconciliación (Letters for Reconciliation) campaign. This campaign, which "encouraged young people and the broader public to send welcoming letters to FARC guerrilla fighters," aimed to reestablish productive and positive interpersonal relationships.[27] In doing so, this initiative sought to break the cycle of violence and mistrust that had developed within the community and thus promote a culture of healing through acceptance. Letters for Reconciliation gained significant momentum and visibility throughout Colombia, with nearly seven thousand ex-combatants receiving letters welcoming them back into society.[28] By promoting shared dialogue and stories this campaign empowered young people to exercise ownership and agency over their participation and enabled active buy-in to the reconciliation aims of Colombia.

Similar efforts to promote reconciliation through dialogue on the periphery are evident in Rwanda. Here, young people have worked collectively to create a forum for acknowledging the traumas of the past. Founded by students, Never Again Rwanda (NAR) is a youth-led peacebuilding organization that pursues sustainable peace through discussions that acknowledge the root causes of past violence. Youth engagement is the cornerstones of NAR's work, which it facilitates through the creation of spaces where youth "from survival, ex-perpetrator and returnee backgrounds" can gather to tell, own, and share their conflict stories.[29] In groups of twenty to thirty, young people meet to have their voices heard, to receive support for trauma, and to think critically about what the stories of their experiences mean. Communal spaces, like the one established by NAR, that enable and empower young people to

share their views on conflict and its implications for the future provide a model for substantive inclusion that formal reconciliation practices could learn from or engage with.

Youth-led community building initiatives that foster dialogue and enable the socialization of reconciliation norms contribute substantively to interpersonal reconciliation efforts in post-conflict countries. The 2016 National Ethnic Youth Conference in Myanmar, for example, sought to cultivate trust between ethnic groups through youth-led constitution-making dialogues and debates on peace and reconciliation issues.[30] Likewise, in Cameroon the Cercle International pour la Promotion de la Création uses theater and intercultural activities, as well as interreligious dialogue, to empower young people's participation in reconciliation.[31] Attempts at reconciliation that mobilize young people have the capacity to rebuild interpersonal relationships within communities by offering fresh perspectives on the root causes of violence and instability. When young people are empowered to lead and act as knowledge producers the potential for change is transformative. As these examples demonstrate, young people have the capacity and political will to develop strategies that both acknowledge past cultures of violence to promote healing and look forward, reframing cultures and traditions in order to overcome and prevent violence.

Youth-led approaches in countries such as Cote d'Ivoire have been instrumental in revealing the importance of partnerships within reconciliation practices for sustainable peace. For example, the Réseau Action Justice et Paix (RAJP) joined with UNICEF to create capacity building programs with young people and to provide recommendations for the reparations policy of the National Commission for Reconciliation and Compensation for Victims. Independent youth-led initiatives such as these that pursue engagement with formal structures through partnerships create further visibility and opportunities for young people to assert ownership over their reconciliation experiences. As Ladisch and Rice suggest, "The catalytic effect of [these] projects matter more than any final product" because the act of engaging in dialogue where a tool was produced by youth for youth establishes a productive legacy for advocacy and rebuilding relationship.[32] Within informal spaces, young people's pursuit of partnerships offers viable avenues for inclusion, as well as prospects for greater coordination between formal and informal reconciliation practices.

The peace and justice work of young people in informal spaces has also contributed significantly to shifts in the discourse regarding their relationship with human rights norms. As their advocacy work becomes more visible in formal peace architecture and their stories are increasingly heard, young people have revealed themselves to be critical rights defenders rather than simply passive rights holders. This shift is significant as it informs how their role in the pursuit of accountability for human rights violations is understood and acknowledged within social and political spaces. The Youth Transparency and Building Foundation in Yemen, for example, has established a network for young people to document the human rights violations in Taiz. This youth-led process that centers their stories reveals the value of these approaches, allowing young people to own and possess agency over their stories. As one young activist explains, documentation processes facilitated by young people are "important to grant fair transitional justice."[33] As such, when young people have ownership over their stories it heightens their willingness to engage with the politics of transition.

Keeping Pace with Evolving Identities and Classifications for Young People

The constantly evolving character of young people presents both challenges and opportunities for their engagement with transitional justice practices. Increasingly, scholarship and practice has advocated for greater recognition of the complexity associated with developing clear guidelines for conceptualizing young people, driven in part by the growing recognition that they are not a homogenous demographic.[34] Definitions of young people remain highly contested as notions of youth in particular are "allusive, yet meaningful" in their intent, particularly when seeking to distinguish their experiences and political agency from children.[35] Understanding classifications of young people is further complicated within institutional spaces by the porousness of references to children and youth. An examination of young people's reconciliation narratives (chapters 3, 4, and 5) reveals this complexity as the prolonged nature of TRC processes often results in a slippage between these classifications in the formal conflict narratives produced in the final reports of TRCs.

To manage this complexity, I have used the term *young people* throughout this book to denote a distinction from adulthood. The term, used in this way, includes children, youth, and adolescents and seeks to acknowledge and capture the vast and complex ways that individuals in peace and conflict practices describe their own identities, as well as how institutions conceive them (discussed further in chapter 2). Thus, the use of young people often signals the presence of both children and youth. It is also used to denote instances where the distinction between who is being talked about is unclear, although this also warranted constant critical reflection throughout the chapters. Where TRC dialogues, reports, and stories have explicitly used the terms "child" or "youth," I have retained these descriptors, yet this also required searches for more detailed descriptors of the intent behind the classifications (as describe in chapters 2–5).

I apply a critical lens to reveal and analyze the discursive slippage and overlap between these classifications. Pathways between childhood, youth, adolescence, and adulthood cannot be predetermined and are not universal. The analysis in this book seeks to be mindful of this by respecting first the voices of young people. To that end, where young people self-identify as youth in their stories, this is reflected in the analysis.[36] This is particularly important when talking about TRCs, as the prolonged process associated with this justice means that for many individuals temporalities are complex and shifting. The definitional frameworks used throughout, echo the one outlined by the 2005 World Youth Report, which casts youth as "an important period of physical, mental, and social maturation" where they "are actively forming identities and determining acceptable roles for themselves."[37] Within this approach, the "for themselves" is critical as it makes space for their subjectivity and ownership in the representation process. It also recognizes youth's capacity as competent social agents whose perspectives offer valuable insights. Framing the experiences of youth this way acknowledges their uniqueness and their capacity to evolve into and out of youthhood at different paces and in TRC contexts across temporalities. Applying a critical lens to classifications of young people also serves as recognition of the power structures that inform definitional decisions within institutions, particularly when conceptualizing their relationships to these structures.

Yet understanding young people's engagement with TRCs also requires an examination of how those interacting with these practices

conceive and cast young people. Pragmatic considerations, such as resourcing, statistics gathering, and timing, impose constant pressure on institutions to establish consistent and replicable parameters for guiding interactions with and between young people in social and political spaces. Özerdem and Podder offer a useful starting point for classifying young people in peace, justice, and conflict contexts. These classifications are informed by three positionalities: one that prefers age-defined categorization, one that highlights the social embeddedness of identities, and one that emphasizes the physiology that informs an individual's situatedness.[38] Together these discourses provide a comprehensive scaffold for representing young people and their interactions with reconciliation practices. A note of caution, however: when used on their own, these discourses perpetuate barriers to young people's engagement. This is in part due to their failure to consider how self-identification informs young people's unique experiences and how their diverse voices are represented and imbued with meaning.

Of the three discourses, the numerical classification, which underpins the age-defined perspective, governs institutional understandings of young people. Within these classifications, variations exist across and within institutions, creating a nuanced, fluid, and complex framework for guiding interactions with young people. Notions of childhood and the classification of child remain static and apply for individuals under the age of eighteen. Yet this numerical boundary is complicated by overlapping ideas for classifying youth and adolescents. UN Resolution 2250 on YPS, for example, defines youth as individuals between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine, while the UN General Assembly definition uses the age range of fifteen to twenty-four.[39] Among the most important development to emerge from recent attempts to numerically classify youth is the recognition that "variations of definition . . . may exist on the national and international level."[40] Acknowledging this, for each of the cases examined in this book I have provided the local numerical classification used by each state to guide its understanding of and interactions with young people.

Young people's inevitable transition into adulthood indicates a need to create viable succession planning. It also highlights the importance of preserving institutional knowledge about youth leadership and their advocacy efforts, as well as their approach to participating in mediation dialogues and reconciliation processes. While there is no unified model

for youth participation, looking ahead to how engagement is maintained and strengthened represents a critical imperative for both formal and informal transitional justice processes.[41]

A Place for Young People in Reconciliation

The acknowledgment of youth as a demographic distinct from children is relatively new and underdeveloped in the transitional justice field. In practice, youth are increasingly recognized as political actors with diverse interests and the capacity to own their autonomous decision-making. Despite this, institutional representations of their participatory capacity are derived from persistent, disproven perceptions that are incomplete and pejorative.[42] Understanding the diverse ways that youth engage in post-conflict contexts and their contributions to reconciliation practices is of critical importance because there is often a high-density youth population in these contexts. There are approximately 600 million individuals between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four living in transitional countries today.[43] In the Solomon Islands, for example, the median age of the population during the conflict was nineteen, and in 2012 (the year the TRC report was handed over to the Solomon Islands government) youth constituted 31 percent of the population.[44] Given this, it is unsurprising that youth were named thematic stakeholders in the reconciliation process.

The Solomon Islands, however, is not unique in its demonstration of this demographic dividend; this trend is also evident in the other cases examined throughout this book. For example, in Sierra Leone at the time of the TRC report's publication youth made up 55 percent of the population, and in Timor-Leste during the conflict one in five individuals were between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five.[45] The prevalence of youth in these post-conflict communities makes their voices and stories essential to the reconciliation process and for broader attempts at sustainable peace through reconciliation. Without these stories, the conflict narratives that TRCs produce remain incomplete and their reconciliation mandates go unfulfilled at the community level. As Karen Brounéus observes, "reconciliation is a societal process" that involves not only "mutual acknowledgment of past suffering" but also "the changing of destructive attitudes and behaviors into constructive relationships towards sustainable peace" that enable productive futures.[46]

Fulfillment of the goal of reconciliation, therefore, requires widespread recognition of the stories of youth, as told from their perspectives, to build and restore authentic relationships.

The exclusion of these stories from the formal TRC conflict records has social and political implications, as the silencing of youth hinders the capacity of the post-conflict community to meaningfully rebuild relationships with the transitional society's largest demographic. Simply put, the reconciliation stories of youth are an essential yet often unacknowledged factor in the pursuit of accountability. Despite several notable bodies of work that investigate the relationship between youth and peacebuilding, youth contributions, particularly their engagement with reconciliation processes, have been overlooked in transitional justice.[47]

The participation of children in conflict, transitional justice, and peacebuilding practices, however, is well defined and globally acknowledged. Since the almost unanimous ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989, the needs and experiences of children have become an increasingly central part of the reconciliation narratives of post-conflict communities. This was due to a shift in the dominant perceptions of childhood that occurred during the drafting of the CRC as states sought to create a universal classification of the *child* that would transcend culture, nationality, gender, and race.[48] Perceptions about children shifted from dominant beliefs that they are passive objects of their parents to seeing them as social agents with rights, defined broadly as entitlements.

The concept of agency is central to the discussions within this book, as displays of agency denote meaningful and substantive participation by young people. Although a detailed discussion of agency is included in chapter 3, it is necessary to provide a working definition up front. Throughout the book, Norman Long's notion of agency is adopted. This definitional approach is significant for understanding the importance of young people's voices and ownership over their stories as it "attributes to the individual actor the capacity to process social experiences and to devise ways of coping with life." Long continues by qualifying how displays of agency are embedded within and informed by context and interactions. He explains that "within the limits of information, uncertainty and other constraints that exist, social actors are 'knowledgeable' and 'capable.' They attempt to solve problems, learn how to intervene in the flow of social events around them, and

monitor continuously their own actions, observing how others react to their behavior and taking note of various contingent circumstances."[49] This definition provides expansive and flexible parameters for discussions of youth and their political participation. The emphasis on learning and problem-solving is essential to considerations of youth agency because it allows for an acknowledgment of individuals capacity to critically engage with events and devise strategies as independent knowledge creators. As such, it recognizes the important yet complex need for autonomous decision-making in youth's pursuit of agency and ownership.

Centering understandings of agency when examining the actions of youth provides us with opportunities to reveal how these individuals navigate and own their roles within the social and political world. Finally, this definition provides a useful starting point as it recognizes and helps explain the constantly evolving capacity of young people that is informed by their interactions with other actors, institutions, and social structures. To that end, this conceptual framing of agency echoes the emerging dialogue on young people within peace and conflict, which acknowledges their evolving capabilities. While discursive notions of political agency have evolved within the peace and conflict fields, in practice challenges remain with respect to the pragmatic realities of the notion of evolving capabilities. National and international policymakers often fail to take seriously how evolving capabilities, determined by external parties, inform changes in the character of political interactions. This tension goes some way toward explaining why young people's diverse experiences and stories continue to be marginalized within formal practices of transitional justice.

The discourse on young people is framed by the institutionalized beliefs of states about their relationship to this demographic, which are embedded in the CRC. As Anna Holzscheiter observes, "The CRC enshrined for the first time in international law, the right of the child to express his or her own views,"[50] thus giving children a voice. In doing so, the CRC provided a framework for guiding the interactions of children with the social and political world. Building upon the norms established in the CRC, the *Graça Machel Report* (1996), the *Cape Town Principles* (1997), and the *Paris Principles* (2007) offer further foundational parameters for the inclusion and recognition of children's voices in post-conflict practices. Graça Machel's report, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Child*, which was presented to the UN General Assembly in 1996, made visible for the first time the broad range of roles that children

occupy in conflict zones and highlighted patterns of abuse experienced by child soldiers.[51]

Following this, in 1997 the policies of the *Cape Town Principles and Best Practices* were adopted to manage and prevent the recruitment of children into the armed forces and to address the issues of "demobilization and social reintegration of child soldiers in Africa."[52] The principles were the product of a symposium conducted by UNICEF and the NGO Working Group on the CRC, which brought together experts to create practical strategies for governments to eliminate the recruitment of child soldiers. Building on the developments from *Cape Town*, the *Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups* (also known as the *Paris Principles*) were adopted alongside the *Paris Commitments to Protect Children from Unlawful Recruitment or Use by Armed Forces or Armed Groups* at the international conference Free Children from War in February 2007.[53] These two documents aimed to provide more detailed guidance for states and NGOs looking to implement strategies for the prevention and reintegration of child soldiers.[54] Taken together, these institutional reports "have significantly contributed to the advancement of children's rights in conflict zones" by ensuring that their needs and interests are not only visible but addressed by states in their post-conflict practices.[55] While well-intentioned, this dialogue laid the foundations for classificatory slippages between children and youth within the formal justice architecture. The universal framing of young people who fought as child soldiers created a narrow image of their participation and obscured opportunities for individuals to claim agency outside this institutionalized discourse.

Despite this normative shift, the capacity of youth to be heard in these contexts is constrained by social perceptions and liberal philosophical notions of what constitutes *childhood*.[56] These views of childhood emphasize the innocence and vulnerability of children and conceive them as predominately apolitical, thus ascribing a distinct character to their experiences.[57] When young people are represented post conflict, it is often from the perspective of external stakeholders who assign political meaning to their experiences. This is particularly prevalent in the reconciliation discourse, as young people are often talked about rather than spoken to.

Representations of young people reproduced and disseminated by NGOs and think tanks illustrate the broader challenges with public discourses on young people constructed within formal institutions

without their voices. These stakeholders are an essential part of the stories of young people, as they advocate for their needs and interests. Yet their reporting, while well-intentioned, often fails to reflect a holistic representation of how young people experience conflict and engage with reconciliation practices. This is due in part to their reliance on emotive representations and Western liberal assumptions, which fail to represent young people's unique conflict experiences and thus silence displays of agency in their participation in post-conflict practices.[58]

In this sense, representations of young people in these contexts are highly selective and prioritize narrow understandings, which relegate youth as a distinct demographic to the periphery. As a result, child soldiers remain the most visible and widely represented group of young people in transitional justice discourses.[59] Within the reconciliation discourse, the prioritizing of the child soldier narrative has had significant impact on the capacity of formal mechanisms such as TRCs to reflect young people's distinct voices. By prioritizing and universalizing the soldier experience this discourse has inadvertently contributed to institutional slippages between children and youth within formal reconciliation narratives.

Representing the stories of youth and young people who occupy roles distinct from the soldier narrative in the post-conflict contexts, therefore, is a complex endeavor because it requires a challenging balancing of expectations across a wide range of stakeholders. This has resulted in an oversimplification of young people's stories, particularly in the institutional narratives created by TRCs. Youth experience conflict, violence, and instability in diverse and at times surprising ways. They are victims, perpetrators, advocates, peacebuilders, political leaders, and spoilers with the capacity to inform our understandings of the political and social world through their speech and their actions. Historically, however, post-conflict processes have excluded their unique voices, framing their experiences and interests as the same as children and women. This socially constructed framing of youth emphasizes who they are not, situating their identity within the broader context of attributes typically assigned to children, adults, and the elderly.

The increased visibility of children in the conflict environment has resulted in a rapidly expanding scholarly field devoted to conducting empirical research on their experiences. These studies focus on describing and assessing the rights, needs, and motivations of children during and after conflict.[60] Despite a few notable exceptions, a critical examination of the relationship between youth and formal reconciliation practices is largely