Youth Transforming Narratives

*Policy Brief | November 2026*

# Youth Mandates on Decolonization at the UN: The Next Secretary-General

Policy & Intergenerational Dialogue Team of Youth Transforming Narratives (YTN)



Youth Transforming Narratives
Policy & Intergenerational Dialogue Team

# Acknowledgement

The Youth Transforming Narratives (YTN) Policy & Intergenerational Dialogue Team would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to the YTN platform for its invaluable support in enabling this policy brief. Special thanks to our Founder and Executive Director, Balkis Chaabane, to our Co-Director of Programs, Joshua Philips, and to our Chief of Impact and Programs, Beatriz Guilherme Carvalho, for both their unwavering guidance and leadership throughout this process.

The authors also acknowledge the exceptional efforts of the Communications Team, whose expertise ensured the seamless publication of this document.

***Youth Mandates on Decolonization at the UN: The Next Secretary-General***

**November 2026**

**Authors**
Nur Aksamija, Policy Co-lead
Sheetal S Joshi, Policy Co-lead
Matilde Forno, Policy Officer
Ines Billeaud, Policy Officer

**Peer Reviewer**
Lucy Rakotomalala

**Editors**
Balkis Chaabane
Joshua Philips

Copyright © 2026 Youth Transforming Narratives (YTN)

All rights reserved. This policy brief may be reproduced and distributed for education and non-commercial purposes, provided that proper credit is given to the author(s) and organization. No part of this publication may be modified or used for commercial purposes without prior written permission.

Youth Transforming Narratives
Policy & Intergenerational Dialogue Team

# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| **C-24** | The Special Committee on Decolonization |
| **DESA** | Department of Economic and Social Affairs |
| **DSAs** | Debt Sustainability Assessments |
| **ECOSOC** | The Economic and Social Council |
| **EOSG** | Executive Office of the Secretary General |
| **ICJ** | International Court of Justice |
| **IMF** | International Monetary Fund |
| **MINURSO** | United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara |
| **NSGTs** | Non-Self-Governing Territories |
| **OHCHR** | Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights |

| | |
|---|---|
| **UN** | United Nations |
| **UNICEF** | The United Nations Children's Fund |
| **P5** | Five Permanent Members of the UNSC |
| **SDGs** | Sustainable Development Goals |
| **UNSG / SG** | United Nations Secretary General |
| **UNSC** | United Nations Security Council |
| **UNCTAD** | UN Conference on Trade and Development |
| **VIIMES** | Vienna International Institute for Middle East Studies |
| **YPS** | Youth, Peace and Security |
| **YTN** | Youth Transforming Narratives |

Youth Transforming Narratives
Policy & Intergenerational Dialogue Team

# Executive Summary


The selection of the next United Nations Secretary-General (UNSG) presents an opportunity to rethink what decolonized, representative, and accountable leadership should look like within the international system. Despite progress in formal decolonization, colonial legacies continue to shape global governance through unequal decision-making power, institutional hierarchies, and the marginalization of global majority perspectives. For young people, particularly those from historically underrepresented communities, these inequalities raise a fundamental question: how can the United Nations credibly represent future generations when those generations have limited influence over its leadership and decisions?

This policy brief by Youth Transforming Narratives (YTN) examines the role, powers, and limitations of the UNSG, drawing on the UN's record on decolonization to highlight both the potential and the structural constraints of the office. While a committed Secretary-General can exercise diplomatic influence, set agendas, and mobilize institutional action, meaningful decolonization cannot depend on an individual leader alone. The selection process and the wider distribution of power within the UN, particularly the influence of the Security Council's permanent members, remain central challenges.

In response, YTN proposes recommendations to advance more equitable global governance, reform the international financial architecture, and institutionalize meaningful youth participation in decision-making. These include strengthening accountability around Security Council vetoes, addressing barriers to young people's participation in the UN, and embedding intergenerational justice into institutional policies and processes. The brief also calls for collective youth advocacy that amplifies diverse perspectives, particularly those of young people with limited access to international decision-making spaces.

This brief does not claim to offer a single or straightforward solution to the complex, deeply rooted challenges of decolonization. Rather, it aims to open a critical discussion, contribute meaningful and actionable recommendations, and encourage collective reflection on the responsibilities of the next UNSG and the broader UN membership. Ultimately, decolonizing global governance requires moving beyond symbolic representation towards a redistribution of power, knowledge, and decision-making authority, with young people recognized not merely as consultees, but as active participants in shaping the international system they will inherit.

Youth Transforming Narratives
Policy & Intergenerational Dialogue Team

# Table of Contents


**Acknowledgements** **2**

**Abbreviations** **3**

**Executive Summary** **4**

**Section 1: Introduction** **6**
1.1. What is YTN? 6
1.2. Previous Decolonization Work by YTN 6
1.3. Why Decolonization Remains Important 6

**Section 2: Who is the Secretary-General?** **8**
2.1. The Role and Leadership 8
2.2. Power 9
2.3. Limitations 9

**Section 3: The Secretary-General and Institutional Decolonization** **10**
3.1. What Succeeded: The Trusteeship System 10
3.2. What is Ongoing 10
3.3. What Failed or Stalled 11

**Section 4: The Next UNSG & Youth Mandates for Decolonization** **11**
4.1. Closing the Intergenerational Gap to Build Decolonial Effort at the UN 11
4.2. Policy Recommendations 13
4.3. Youth Collective Actions Recommendations 19

**Conclusion** **20**

**Bibliography** **21**

Youth Transforming Narratives
Policy & Intergenerational Dialogue Team

# Section 1: Introduction

## *1.1. What is YTN?*

Youth Transforming Narratives (YTN) is a youth-led movement focused on decolonizing international peace and security through youth leadership. Our work covers a wide range of themes and uses different forms of participation in the international system to achieve these goals, from advocacy to research, partnerships with other organizations, and policy work such as this brief.

With this work, we seek to bridge youth collective remarks on what improved leadership for the United Nations (UN) would look like – particularly focused on the UN Secretary-General (UNSG). With many different calls to action from different candidates being put forward in the upcoming UNSG selection, YTN felt there was a lack of discussion from the next generation of members in the sphere of peace, security, and development; but even more so, we wanted to put forward a piece of writing that could be accessible for all youth, with their needs in mind.

## *1.2. Previous Decolonization Work by YTN*

Decolonization remains a cornerstone to improving the functionality of international peace, security, and development. Resources and narrative control still remain in the hands of a small number of Western states, but nonetheless, YTN is dedicated to changing this.

Some of our previous decolonization efforts include past policy briefs; advocacy campaigns, most recently on Green Colonialism; a research toolkit on decolonizing the language of international peace and security; and a YPS Community of Practice on Youth and Decoloniality, among other engagements. Our work is produced by a women-led and highly international team, while also yielding a very wide geographical reach.

This policy piece on the UNSG selection represents the culmination of work and involvement in a space that is yet to fully capture how youth can be meaningful participants in the development of policies that actively affect them. This is a first step in a long journey towards the decolonization and reform of international leadership in peace, security, and development. Yet, we hope this will launch the conversation on the need to decolonize international institutions, including the United Nations.

## *1.3. Why Decolonization Remains Important*

Decolonization remains important, not only because the UN has failed to recognize its historical importance, but also because formal

independence did not eliminate the political, economic, epistemic, and institutional structures through which colonial power continues to shape global governance. The UN itself acknowledges that its decolonization process remains unfinished, with 17 Non-Self-Governing Territories still on the agenda of the Special Committee on Decolonization (C-24) (United Nations, 2026). However, contemporary decolonization must extend beyond territorial independence. The persisting North-South divide demonstrates why this remains relevant. These inequalities manifest through unequal economic, political, digital and knowledge systems rooted in historical power imbalances. The UN Independent Expert report emphasizes that tackling these inequalities requires democratizing global governance and strengthening inclusion, redistribution and collective self-determination (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2025). Therefore, decolonizing international affairs requires questioning who built the international order, who benefits from it, and who still remains excluded (Jacobs et al., 2026).

As these inequalities are embedded within the UN's institutional architecture, there remains a need for equal agenda-setting and decision-making power. The UN Security Council continues to be a monopoly of political authority, while its composition reflects the power distribution of 1945. Africa's continued underrepresentation, despite the continent being central to the Council's agenda, overwhelmingly portrays that colonial legacies, the privileged position, and veto power of the P5 continue to shape debates, authority, and agendas at the UN (Alene et al., 2023).

The same monopoly of authority is visible in the selection of the Secretary-General. Although the 2025-2026 selection process introduced greater transparency through public nominations, candidate vision statements, financing disclosures, and interactive dialogues, the UNSC's recommendation remains the 'decisive institutional requirement,' with the P5 exercising disproportionate influence over this process (Von Einsiedel, 2015; United Nations, 2026). While Article 97 of the UN Charter gives the General Assembly formal power to appoint the UNSG, it technically only approves candidates put forward by the UNSC, undermining the agency of the global majority countries. The selection of the Secretary-General is, therefore, part of the decolonization question: who has substantive influence over choosing the individual expected to lead an organization of 193 member states?

> ***For today's youth, particularly those from the global majority countries, these structures are not distant institutional debates.***

Young people are inheriting an international system whose rules and hierarchies still portray a system of unequal power, representation, and decision-making. While the 'Declaration on Future Generations' recognizes youth as agents of change and calls for intergenerational dialogue and engagement to be incorporated into policy and decision-making processes, recognition alone does not guarantee influence or agenda-setting power (United Nations, 2024). The continued gap between being recognized, included, and consulted, and being able to shape the policies, institutions, and outcomes that affect our generation demonstrates why a youth-led decolonial agenda is important. For YTN, an unfinished decolonization agenda at the UN is ultimately about moving from tokenistic representation to redistribution of power, and ensuring that youth are not only included in the international order but are active participants in reshaping it.

# Section 2: Who is the Secretary-General?

## *2.1. The Role and Leadership*

> ***Welcome, Dag Hammarskjöld, to the most impossible job on this earth.***

Trygve Lie, the first Secretary-General of the United Nations, used these words to greet his successor, Dag Hammarskjöld of Sweden, in New York on April 9, 1953 (Character Sketches: Trygve Lie by Brian Urquhart, 2019). The remark highlights a structural tension that still defines the office: the Secretary-General (SG) is expected to lead a global organization while depending entirely on the member states that constitute it.

Formally, the UN Charter designates the SG as the Organization's "chief administrative officer" (United Nations, 1945, Art. 97). In this capacity, the SG runs the Secretariat, prepares the annual budget and report, appoints senior officials, and carries out tasks assigned by the General Assembly, the Security Council, and other UN organs (United Nations, 1945, Arts. 97–98). The office is not an authoritative leader over member states; rather, it fuses administration with diplomacy and representation, functioning, in the UN's own description, as "equal parts diplomat and advocate, civil servant and CEO" (United Nations, 2015). How individual office-holders have fulfilled the responsibilities of the role has varied: some have pursued a more activist political profile, others a more administrative one (Council on Foreign Relations [CFR], 2026).

## 2.2. Power

The SG's most distinctive formal power is granted by Article 99 of the Charter, which allows the office-holder to bring to the Security Council any matter they judge liable to threaten international peace and security (United Nations, 1945). This is an agenda-setting power: it lets the SG elevate crises and press for action even absent consensus among states. Beyond this, the SG exercises "good offices,"[1] quiet mediation, preventive diplomacy, and the deployment of envoys and special representatives, much of which rests on informal persuasion, coalition-building, and the legitimacy attached to the office rather than on any binding authority (United Nations, n.d.-a).

## 2.3. Limitations

The SG's power is bounded at its source. Any Member State may nominate a candidate, and the General Assembly formally appoints the SG (United Nations, 1945, Art. 97). Between these stages, however, the Security Council decides whom to recommend: a candidate needs nine of the Council's fifteen votes and no negative vote from any of the five permanent members (P5), China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States (United Nations, 1945, Art. 27(3); CFR, 2026).

Because the Council has always recommended a single candidate, the Assembly's appointment has in practice confirmed a choice already filtered by the P5 (Security Council Report, 2026b). The same asymmetry constrains the exercise of the mandate: the SG cannot compel state compliance with UN recommendations, and the office's initiatives depend on Council backing that any permanent member can withhold.

This is more than a procedural detail. The SG is presented as a representative of the international community as a whole, yet the P5 veto concentrates disproportionate control over the office, and over which issues receive collective action, in states that occupied dominant positions in the very international order decolonization was meant to unwind. The SG may criticize powerful states rhetorically, but converting that criticism into institutional action still fully relies on the political approval of said powerful states (CFR, 2026). Understanding the office therefore means looking past any individual Secretary-General to the structure of unequal power that is bound to the role.

[1] These are both public and private steps taken to prevent international disputes from arising, escalating, or spreading.(United Nations, n.d., retrieved 5 October 2026)

Youth Transforming Narratives
Policy & Intergenerational Dialogue Team

# Section 3: The Secretary-General and Institutional Decolonization

Beyond selection politics, the SG's office has also functioned as the administrative engine of the UN's own decolonization mandate under Charter Chapters XI–XIII: servicing the Trusteeship Council, compiling and transmitting the information member states are required to submit under Article 73(e), and appointing personal envoys to mediate self-determination disputes. For advocates, this means the question is not only who becomes Secretary-General, but which states that office depends on to deliver results.

## *3.1. What Succeeded: The Trusteeship System*

The Charter's Chapter XII created the International Trusteeship System and the Trusteeship Council to supervise eleven trust territories, mostly in Africa and the Pacific, framing colonial administration as a "sacred trust" owed to their inhabitants. All eleven trust territories eventually achieved independence or free association with an independent state; Palau, the last, became a UN member in October 1994, and the Trusteeship Council, serviced throughout by the Secretariat under the SG, suspended its operations on 1 November 1994, its mandate essentially complete (United Nations, 2023). More broadly, of the roughly 750 million people who lived under colonial administration when the UN was founded in 1945, more than eighty former colonies have since become independent, a shift the UN itself frames as the Organization's first major success (United Nations, 2026c).

## *3.2. What is Ongoing*

Seventeen Non-Self-Governing Territories (NSGTs), home to roughly two million people, remain on the UN list, from Western Sahara to small island territories in the Caribbean and Pacific (UN News, 2026). The General Assembly's Special Committee on Decolonization (the C-24), established in 1961, continues to review their status annually, drawing on the SG's yearly reports on information transmitted under Article 73(e).

Opening the C-24's 2026 session, Secretary-General António Guterres, in remarks delivered by his Chef de Cabinet, reaffirmed decolonization as a core UN objective and set out three priorities for the remaining agenda: inclusive dialogue among NSGTs, administering powers, and member states; a central role for young people; and resilience and climate adaptation for small-island territories facing rising seas and extreme weather (United Nations Secretary-General, 2026; UN News, 2026). The explicit naming of youth as central to this agenda is a notable point of entry for youth decolonization advocacy.

### 3.3. What Failed or Stalled?

The Western Sahara case is one of the clearest examples of institutional decolonization stalling despite sustained SG engagement. MINURSO was established in 1991 to organize a referendum offering the territory's people a choice between independence and integration with Morocco. Voter-identification work, overseen by the mission, deadlocked through the 1990s and was effectively suspended in 1996; despite repeated envoy-led initiatives over the following three decades, no referendum has been held (Theofilopoulou, 2025).

The SG has been involved at every stage: MINURSO is headed by the SG's Special Representative, the SG reports to the Security Council ahead of each mandate renewal, and successive SGs have appointed personal envoys, most recently Staffan de Mistura in 2021 (United Nations Secretary-General, 2021). The direction of the process, however, has been set elsewhere. Security Council Resolution 2797 (2025) called for negotiations based on Morocco's 2007 autonomy proposal, a shift some legal scholars argue sits uneasily with the ICJ's 2019 Chagos Advisory Opinion (Theofilopoulou, 2025), and the 2026 talks were convened by the United States with de Mistura as co-chair (Security Council Report, 2026). The SG's envoy remains in the room, but the terms are set by the Council and its most powerful members, highlighting the structural limitation described previously.

### Implications for Decolonial and Youth Advocacy

Across all three cases, the SG's office performed its Charter functions, while outcomes followed the choices of administering powers and the Security Council. This is why SG selection, while important, cannot be a single solution to decolonizing peace and security. A committed SG can use the office's agenda-setting power, as with the 2026 C-24 priorities on youth participation and small-island climate resilience (United Nations Secretary-General, 2026), but cannot compel administering powers to report or override the Council on final status. Advocacy should therefore treat SG selection as one pressure point among several, pairing engagement with the SG's convening role with sustained pressure on administering powers and Council members, where outcomes are decided.

## Section 4: The Next UNSG & Youth Mandates for Decolonization

### 4.1. Closing the Intergenerational Gap to Build Decolonial Effort at the UN

Decolonizing the United Nations requires more than just changing institutional structures.

It also requires examining who is able to shape the knowledge, priorities, and decisions produced through those structures. The intergenerational gap within the UN is therefore not simply a question of age or representation. It is a question of power. This is exactly where the UNSG can make a difference by using current and existing mandates as building blocks to further meaningful youth participation. While UN Resolution 2250 (2015) institutionalized the recognition of youth as agents of change in peace and security, participation does not guarantee that youth knowledge is integrated within existing UN work. The distinction between participation and meaningful participation is central to this challenge. UNICEF Innocenti's 'Voices for Impact' finds that meaningful youth engagement requires participation that goes beyond consultation, is inclusive and representative, is supported before, during and after engagement, and is accountable to young people (UNICEF Innocenti, 2024). This suggests that inviting young people into existing UN processes is insufficient when agendas and decisions have already been substantially determined. There are structural hesitations from higher-level UN bureaucrats, who subsequently need to expand their current work to include youth knowledge. Hence, for an intergenerational dialogue to work efficiently, the next UNSG in their position can demand that higher-level bureaucrats mandatorily include youth suggestions and demands on current policies and mandates in their work (Berents, 2025).

A decolonial approach requires a shift from participation, representation, and recognition toward conscious reorganization, meaningful participation, and shared ownership. McDonnell and Gordon's examination of Indigenous participation in UN climate governance demonstrates how formal participation can remain performative when institutional spaces continue to regulate who can speak, how they can speak, and which forms of knowledge are recognized. At the same time, their research shows how Indigenous participants can use their agency to create spaces for knowledge sharing and challenge these institutional constraints (McDonnell & Gordon, 2026). While this case concerns Indigenous participation rather than youth specifically, it offers an important parallel for youth engagement: inclusion does not become transformative unless it alters the structures through which participation is organized, and knowledge is produced.

This is also a question of epistemic decolonization. UN institutions do not engage with a politically neutral category of "youth." Berents and Fosu's analysis of UN discourse on YPS identifies recurring framings of young people as future leaders, resources, deficient actors but also exceptional actors. They demonstrate that youth inclusion can remain conditional on conformity with institutional

expectations, reproducing unequal power relations even within agendas designed to promote inclusion (Berents & Fosu, 2026).

The question, therefore, is not youth inclusion but who defines what legitimate youth participation looks like and whose forms of knowledge are treated as authoritative. Hence, by elevating the authority of local, indigenous youth knowledge from global majority countries within inclusive frameworks, the next UNSG can build stronger intergenerational decolonial dialogue.

The UN has already established a foundation for this transition. The 2026 'Core Principles for Meaningful Youth Participation' explicitly calls for structured youth participation across agenda-setting, policy formulation, negotiations, implementation and review, while emphasizing diversity, representation, and co-governance (United Nations Youth Office, 2026). This represents an important movement away from treating young people primarily as consultees toward recognizing them as partners in global governance and decision-making. The challenge now is institutionalization. The next UNSG can build on these commitments by embedding the Core Principles into the procedural requirements of relevant UN processes, rather than leaving them as voluntary, non-binding guidance.

Hence, YTN, representing youth from the global majority, put forward our recommendations and demands on what we want to see from the next UN Secretary-General on democratizing global governance, reforming the international financial architecture, and enforcing intergenerational justice.

## *4.2. Policy Recommendations*

The international system faces a crisis of credibility driven by structural failures that date back to 1945. Addressing these institutional breakdowns requires a concrete agenda for executive activity framed directly around the levers available to the Secretary General: convening power, appointment authority, budget proposals, Secretariat directives, and moral leadership. Rather than relying on vague calls for broad systemic change, the Secretary General must deploy the Secretariat's immediate operational authority across three key pillars: democratizing global governance, reforming the international financial architecture, and enforcing intergenerational justice.

### 4.2.1. Democratizing Global Governance and Internal UN Reform

#### *Restructuring UN decision-making bodies*

Transforming UN decision-making from symbolic consensus into binding accountability requires direct intervention in how the Secretariat handles crises and navigates the UN's most contested structural feature: the veto power of the Security Council's five permanent members (P5).

Designed in the immediate aftermath of World War II, the veto mechanism was intended to guarantee global stability by securing the participation of major post-war military powers. In practice, however, it created a permanent institutional imbalance, concentrating decisive veto authority in the hands of five individual states while leaving the global majority without comparable structural influence. This dynamic is not new; throughout the Cold War and into the 21st century, the veto has consistently functioned as an instrument of geopolitical insulation, enabling permanent members to protect strategic allies, block international oversight, and freeze Council action during grave conflicts. What has changed is the severity of its repercussions.

Gaza serves as the most recent example of this institutional breakdown.

As highlighted in recent research from the Vienna International Institute for Middle East Studies (VIIMES), the primary driver of Council paralysis during the genocide is the misuse of the veto power under Article 27. Multiple resolutions demanding an immediate ceasefire, unhindered humanitarian access, and protection for civilians were repeatedly blocked by permanent members (primarily the United States). The analysis frames this not as an isolated political disagreement, but as a "systemic malfunction."

To directly counter this structural gridlock, the Secretary General must deploy the Secretariat's administrative and convening authority to challenge the impunity of the veto. First, the Secretary General should issue an Executive Order establishing an automatic protocol for Article 99. Under this rule, whenever the Office of the Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide or the High Commissioner for Human Rights flags an active risk of mass atrocities, the Secretary General would be mandated to invoke Article 99 and force a Security Council session within 24 hours. While invoking Article 99 cannot legally override a P5 veto, forcing an immediate, formal Council session strips member states of the ability to use procedural delays to avoid public accountability.

To further raise the political cost of casting a veto during humanitarian catastrophes, the Secretary General must formalize a Secretariat protocol requiring an Emergency Special Session of the General Assembly to be convened within 72 hours whenever a permanent member blocks a resolution concerning mass atrocities or emergency humanitarian access. Managed directly through a new public Veto Transparency Tracker within the Executive Office, this mechanism builds on existing Assembly mandates by creating a standardized procedural pipeline that transfers stalled Council debates to the floor of the General Assembly, where no single state possesses

veto authority. Finally, recognizing that procedural shifts alone cannot solve a 1945 structural imbalance, the Secretary General must deploy the office's unique moral leadership to launch a dedicated diplomatic task force. This panel will be charged with delivering a concrete, votable Charter amendment proposal to the General Assembly within 12 months, advocating for two permanent, veto-bearing seats for African nations and expanded representation for the global majority. By systematically linking emergency Secretariat triggers to General Assembly oversight and permanent structural reform, the Secretary General can make the misuse of the veto politically indefensible and begin restoring institutional credibility to global governance.

In continuing to bridge structural divides within the UN, we also recommend that the Secretary General simultaneously draft a General Assembly resolution establishing an independent Sovereign Debt Restructuring Panel hosted under the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Similar to the Security Council veto power paralyzing political governance, the governance of global finance remains heavily skewed toward wealthy creditor nations and private lending cartels. Developing countries in severe debt distress are currently forced to navigate fragmented, creditor-led negotiations through institutions like the World Bank and IMF, where decision-making power is strictly tied to capital leveraging and shares. The result is therefore a system that systematically prioritizes external debt service over domestic spending on healthcare, education, and climate adaptation. While the Secretary General cannot unilaterally alter the statutes of external financial institutions, the office holds the direct procedural power under Article 98 of the UN Charter and Rule 13 of the General Assembly Rules of Procedure to draft and officially publish formal resolutions for consideration by member states.

### *Shifting youth engagement from tokenism to power*

Institutional reform must extend beyond high-level statecraft to dismantle the internal structural barriers that exclude young people from the United Nations' workforce and policy decisions. For decades, youth movements have pointed out the hypocrisy of a global institution advocating for equity while relying on an entry pipeline that systematically favors those from wealthy backgrounds and wealthy nations. Meaningful youth engagement cannot occur through tokenistic consultations while unpaid internships function as a financial barrier to entry. To transform these long-standing youth demands into enforceable policy, the Secretary General must deploy the Secretariat's direct administrative authority. The Secretary General should issue a binding Secretariat Administrative Instruction eliminating all unpaid internships across all UN departments and regional commissions. To operationalize this directive, the Secretary General must use their explicit authority over

budget preparation to insert a mandatory line item into the annual Proposed Program Budget submitted to the General Assembly Fifth Committee, allocating dedicated funding for living stipends and health coverage for all incoming Secretariat interns.

Beyond reforming entry-level employment, the Secretary General must institutionalize structural power for young people within internal policy design. Building directly on the demands outlined in the UN Youth Strategy and youth-led climate movements, the operational mandate of the Assistant Secretary General for Youth Affairs must be elevated from an advisory role to an enforcement body. The Secretary General should issue an Executive Directive empowering the UN Youth Office to conduct mandatory Future Generations Impact Assessments on all major internal UN policy proposals, strategic frameworks, and program budgets before they are finalized. Crucially, this directive should grant the Youth Office a 30-day suspensive hold to enable the office to delay, flag, and require formal revisions to any internal decisions that threaten long-term intergenerational equity or youth well-being.

Finally, to address the demand for genuine voting power in global decision-making, the Secretary General must leverage executive appointment and governance authority over UN-managed bodies. The Secretary General should issue an administrative mandate requiring that all governing boards, steering committees, and trust funds established under Secretariat oversight - most notably climate mechanisms such as the Loss and Damage Fund and the Green Climate Fund - allocate a minimum of 20% of their voting seats to accredited youth representatives under the age of 30. To ensure this requirement does not reproduce socio-economic exclusion, the mandate must require full UN-funded travel, accommodation, and daily stipends for all youth representatives. By pairing internal employment equity with binding procedural holds and guaranteed voting seats, the Secretary General can transition youth engagement from symbolic outreach into structural institutional power.

### 4.2.2. Reforming the International Financial Architecture

#### *Sovereign debt cancellation and multilateral restructuring*

The current international financial architecture routinely forces developing nations to prioritize external debt servicing over fundamental investments in public health, education, and climate resilience. Developing countries in severe debt distress are left with little recourse, forced into fragmented, creditor-led negotiations through institutions like the IMF where decision-making power is strictly tied to capital shares rather than demographic realities or human rights obligations.

To break this systemic trap, the Secretary General must move beyond issuing advisory frameworks and deploy the Secretariat's direct administrative, analytical, and procedural authority. Under Article 98 of the UN Charter and Rule 13 of the General Assembly Rules of Procedure, the Secretary General holds the explicit constitutional power to draft and officially create formal resolutions for consideration by member states. Leveraging this direct procedural lever, the Secretary General must propose a General Assembly resolution establishing an independent, multilateral Sovereign Debt Restructuring Panel hosted under the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Placing this panel under ECOSOC grounds debt governance within a principal UN organ where global majority nations hold equitable voting representation.

Concurrently, the Secretary General must issue an Executive Directive instructing the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) to operationalize this panel by publishing mandatory, human-rights-centered Debt Sustainability Assessments (DSAs) for all low- and middle-income countries facing debt issues. These assessments will legally establish minimum spending floors for essential public services and climate adaptation that sovereign states must prioritize before meeting external debt obligations. By staffing the ECOSOC panel through Secretariat resources, the Secretary General equips it to issue binding restructuring plans and enforce temporary standstills on debt payments during severe crises, giving international economic guidance true structural weight.

### 4.2.3. Intergenerational Climate Justice and Peaceful Security

#### *Enforcing intergenerational rights and accountability*

Embedding long-term anticipatory governance into the multilateral system requires dedicated, operational mechanisms within the Executive Office of the Secretary General (EOSG) rather than non-binding declarations. While member states committed to intergenerational equity in the Declaration on Future Generations, these commitments risk remaining symbolic without procedural checks built into the Secretariat's daily workflow. The Secretary General holds the direct administrative authority under the UN Charter to structure the EOSG, establish specialized envoy posts, and mandate internal review protocols for all documentation submitted to intergovernmental bodies.

To operationalize these commitments into enforceable practice, the Secretary General must issue an Executive Order creating a dedicated UN Special Envoy for Future Generations directly within the ECOSG.

The Secretary General will grant this Envoy the explicit mandate to conduct mandatory, pre-legislative Future Impact Reviews on all major UN strategic frameworks, policy proposals, and system-wide program budgets before they are finalized and submitted to member states. Modeled on environmental and regulatory impact assessments, these reviews will systematically evaluate proposals for long-term ecological risks, demographic shifts, and intergenerational liabilities, establishing a formal paper trail that highlights potential harm to future populations.

Crucially, the Secretary General must attach procedural consequences to this position: if the Special Envoy determines that a proposed framework or budget line item poses severe, unmitigated long-term harm, the Envoy will hold the authority to issue an administrative hold, requiring the drafting department to present alternative, long-term sustainable options. By embedding an Envoy with direct oversight authority into the Secretariat's approval pipeline, the Secretary General transforms intergenerational equity from an abstract moral concept into an active procedural check on multilateral decision-making.

### *Demilitarization and youth inclusion in peace and security*

Addressing intergenerational security requires shifting global expenditures away from escalating militarization and directly toward human development and climate resilience.

Global military spending and multilateral development financing represent competing claims on public resources; every increase in armaments directly reduces the fiscal space available to fund climate adaptation, public education, and healthcare. While the Secretary General cannot directly rewrite national military budgets, the office holds unmatched global convening authority under Article 99 and Chapter X of the UN Charter, alongside direct oversight of the UN fund-raising architectures.

The Secretary General must deploy this platform during the opening of the General Assembly High Level to launch the "1% Peace Dividend for Sustainable Development" initiative. Through this campaign, the Secretary General will formally publish an annual reporting mandate requiring member states to declare their national military expenditures alongside their contributions to international development. Moreover, the Secretary General will establish a dedicated pledge tracking mechanism within the Secretariat to facilitate the direct reallocation of 1 % of member states' military allocations in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Stimulus Fund and the UN Peacebuilding Fund. By institutionalizing this reporting and transfer framework within the Executive Office, the Secretary General forces a transparent, annual accounting of global spending priorities on the floor of the General Assembly.

Finally, protecting intergenerational security requires safeguarding the young people actively demanding structural reform. Youth climate activists and human right defenders operating in conflict zones and authoritarian regimes face unprecedented levels of state surveillance, criminalization, and physical retaliation. To counter these threats, the Secretary General must deploy direct administrative authority over UN human rights entities by issuing a Secretariat Directive instructing the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to establish a Youth Human Rights Defenders Rapid Response Mechanism.

This mechanism will operate as an expedited, operational protection protocol managed by OHCHR field offices. It will provide emergency relocation funding, coordinate immediate legal assistance, and leverage the Secretary General's diplomatic channels to facilitate rapid-entry humanitarian visas for young activists facing imminent physical danger or political persecution. Furthermore, the Secretary General will mandate that OHCHR publish an annual Public Alert Index on state retaliation against youth defenders, linking state compliance with international protection standards directly to UN partnership agreements. Through these targeted executive orders, budgetary line items, and operational protective protocols, the Secretary General moves the United Nations beyond symbolic rhetoric, establishing a tangible, enforceable framework for global reform and intergenerational protection.

## *4.3 Youth Collective Actions Recommendations*

This Policy Brief thus far has established both the significance of the UN Secretary-General's role, that being one limited in power but substantial in representation. Furthermore, previous transitions in UN systems, processes, and resolutions that centered around decolonization and youth inclusion have been investigated to establish the need for a reconciliation in the extent of meaningful and improved youth involvement in global policy. Therefore, when it comes specifically to the selection of the next UNSG, it is crucial that youth involved in peace, security, development, and activism globally come together and align on shared concerns.

It is of critical importance that the future holders of the UNSG position are capable of representing the global majority and deepening the current geographical diversity of seat-holders. Furthermore, while acknowledging the very real limitations to the power and influence of this role, it is regardless critical that youth come together to call on future UNSGs to ensure youth inclusion in a meaningful manner; a form of inclusion that creates real, lasting, and tangible policy impacts.

In terms of collective action to be taken by youth in terms of UNSG selection, a key element of this process is ensuring that youth who have access to spaces of peace, security,

and development can advocate not only for their own beliefs, but particularly for the benefit and interest of youth who lack the same access, resources, or interest in fields regarding peace, security, and development. Without reducing global youth populations to a monolith, it is critical that youth activists across diverse activism spaces utilize their reach and voices to demand that the leadership of the UN, the face of international peace and security, represents them and works towards a better world for youth to inherit.

# Conclusion

In all, this report represents a culmination of ever-enduring work by youth activists as well as previous efforts for UN reform and decolonization. In a turbulent time regarding financial and legitimacy uncertainty for the UN moving forward, particularly in the wake of UN80, it is of critical importance that the highest leadership in global governance reflects the desire for an improved UN system that reflects the populations it is meant to be serving, rather than tokenizing and erasing them.

Previous attempts at representation and meaningful youth inclusion have been undertaken at the UN, such as the Declaration on Future Generations, and Resolution 2250, which solidified the importance of youth inclusion in peace processes (United Nations; 2024, 2015). However, in terms of the UN Secretary-General selection processes, minimal reform has been institutionalized that could aid in making the process of selecting a new UNSG more transparent and fair. This raises the critical question that inspired this policy work at hand: if governments globally are unable to have a meaningful impact on the next selection of the UNSG, the face of international peace, security, and development, then how are youth who lack the same resources and forums meant to influence a primary figure in forming the world they will come to inherit? Furthermore, this question raises further concerns about how the field of peace, security, and development could be seen as legitimate by a growing youth population who feel a full divide from the leadership and power structures ruling the international community. Youth groups must not only be given a seat at the table, but rather our concerns, experiences, and demands, must contribute to the policies that reach beyond the discussion.

To ensure that the UN maintains its legitimacy in public opinion, it is absolutely critical that calls for decolonization are not just heard, but institutionalized. With these concerns and the connection between meaningful youth inclusion, decolonization, peace and security, and the necessity of a free, fair, and inclusive UNSG selection process discussed, this work proposes meaningful recommendations that should be applied to amend missing youth representation in UN leadership decisions, and highlight the demands young people are requesting from the next UNSG.

Youth Transforming Narratives
Policy & Intergenerational Dialogue Team

# Bibliography


Alene, N. M., Ali, M. S., & Tadesse, K. Y. (2023). Africa's quest for reform of the United Nations Security Council: A just cause curbed by unrealistic proposals. African Journal on Conflict Resolution, 23(1), 60–83. https://ajcr.pub/article/view/16785/20321

Berents, H. (2025). 'What we give up to get where we're going': Compromise in the institutionalizing of youth peace advocacy. Globalizations, 22(3), 456–471. https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2024.2408077

Berents, H., & Fosu, R. (2026). Constituting 'youth': Conditionality and compliance in UN discourses on youth, peace and security. Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding. https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2025.2506217

Character Sketches: Trygve Lie by Brian Urquhart. (2019, February 13). UN News. https://news.un.org/en/spotlight/character-sketches-trygve-lie-brian-urquhart

Council on Foreign Relations. (2026). The role of the UN Secretary-General. https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/role-un-secretary-general

How the UN failed in Western Sahara. (2025, September 12). International Centre for Dialogue Initiatives. https://dialogueinitiatives.org/how-the-un-failed-in-western-sahara/

Jacobs, S., Fukuda-Parr, S., & Nowroozian, A. (2026). Introduction: A new Global South agenda for the world order. In S. Fukuda-Parr & S. Jacobs (eds.), The Palgrave handbook on decolonizing international affairs. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-18958-5_1

McDonnell, S., & Gordon, B. (2026). Indigenous participation in the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples' Platform: The need to decolonize UN climate governance. Geoforum, 169, 104514. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S001671852500315X

Security Council Report. (2025, October 31). Western Sahara: Vote on a draft resolution renewing MINURSO's mandate. What's In Blue. https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2025/10/western-sahara-vote-on-a-draft-resolution-renewing-minursos-mandate-3.php

The Security Council and the future of Western Sahara – with a 'group of friends' like these…? (2025, July 22). EJIL: Talk! https://www.ejiltalk.org/the-security-council-and-the-future-of-western-sahara-with-a-group-of-friends-like-these/

Theofilopoulou, A., (2025, September 12). How the UN failed in Western Sahara. International Centre for Dialogue Initiatives. https://dialogueinitiatives.org/how-the-un-failed-in-western-sahara/

United Nations Human Rights Council. (2025). Major geopolitical trends and structural drivers of the North-South divide (A/HRC/60/31). United Nations. https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/60/31

United Nations. (1945). Charter of the United Nations. https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter

United Nations General Assembly. (1997). Strengthening of the United Nations system (A/RES/51/241). https://docs.un.org/A/Res/51/241

United Nations General Assembly. (2015). Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly (A/RES/69/321). https://docs.un.org/A/Res/69/321

United Nations. (2015). The Secretary-General. https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/biography

United Nations. (2016). Selection and appointment of António Guterres. https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/selection-and-appointment-of-antonio-guterres

United Nations. (2021). Selection and appointment of António Guterres: Process in 2021. https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/selection-and-appointment-of-antonio-guterres

UNICEF Innocenti. (2024). Voices for impact: Meaningful youth engagement in the multilateral system. UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence. https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/reports/meaningful-youth-engagement-multilateral-system

United Nations. (2024). Pact for the future: Declaration on future generations (Annex II to A/RES/79/1). https://www.un.org/pact-for-the-future/en/declaration-future-generations

United Nations. (n.d.-b). Selection and appointment process. https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/appointment-secretary-general

United Nations. (n.d.-c). Trusteeship Council. https://www.un.org/en/about-us/trusteeship-council

United Nations. (n.d.-d). Reports of the Secretary-General on decolonization. https://www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/node/3244

United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs. (n.d.). Personal Envoy for Western Sahara [Factsheet]. https://dppa.un.org/en/factsheet/personal-envoy-western-sahara

United Nations General Assembly. (2025). Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly (A/RES/79/327). https://docs.un.org/A/Res/79/327

United Nations. (2024). Pact for the future: Declaration on future generations (Annex II to A/RES/79/1). https://www.un.org/pact-for-the-future/en/declaration-future-generations

United Nations. (2026). Selection and appointment of the next Secretary-General. https://www.un.org/en/sg-selection-and-appointment

United Nations. (2026a). Selection and appointment of the next Secretary-General (2025–2026). https://www.un.org/en/sg-selection-and-appointment

United Nations. (2026b). Selection and appointment process: Overview of previous processes. https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/appointment-secretary-general

United Nations. (2026c). Decolonization. https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/decolonization/

United Nations. (2026d). United Nations and decolonization: About. https://www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/about

United Nations News. (2026, February 16). UN chief urges renewed push to complete decolonization as 17 territories remain. https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/02/1166971

United Nations Youth Office. (2026). Core principles for meaningful youth participation in intergovernmental processes and across the work of the United Nations. United Nations. https://www.un.org/youthaffairs/en/core-principles-meaningful-youth-participation

United Nations Secretary-General. (2026, February 16). Secretary-General's remarks at the organizational meeting of the 2026 session of the Special Committee on Decolonization [as delivered by the Chef de Cabinet]. https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statements/2026-02-16/secretary-generals-remarks-the-organizational-meeting-of-the-2026-session-of-the-special-committee-decolonization-delivered-the-chef-de-cabinet

Urquhart, B. (2019, February 13). Character sketches: Trygve Lie. UN News. https://news.un.org/en/spotlight/character-sketches-trygve-lie-brian-urquhart

Von Einsiedel, S. (2015, September 17). Further steps needed to open up the Secretary-General selection process. United Nations University Centre for Policy Research. https://unu.edu/cpr/blog-post/further-steps-needed-open-secretary-general-selection-process


Youth
Transforming
Narratives