United Nations University
Centre for Policy Research

2025 Peacebuilding Fund Thematic Review on Youth, Peace and Security

Executive summary

Erica Gaston, Imane Karimou, Luisa Kern and Emma Bapt

UNU CPR · PEACEBUILDING FUND · UNFPA · unicef for every child · DPPA · UNDP · UN environment programme · UN Peacekeeping · CLIMATE SECURITY MECHANISM

This Executive Summary is extracted from the full *2025 Peacebuilding Fund Thematic Review on Youth, Peace and Security*. The 2025 Thematic Review was commissioned by the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The Climate Security Mechanism and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) also provided some support, as a follow-on to youth-related findings in the 2023 *Climate-Security and Peacebuilding Thematic Review*. Further details about the scope of research, the methodology, and other key findings are included in the full Thematic Review.

Cover image credit: UNDP El Salvador, "Young People for Freedom" Joint Programme, 2023.

Executive summary

The landmark Security Council resolution 2250 (2015) on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) recognized the "important and positive contribution of youth in efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security" and set out five pillars for youth involvement. It urged Member States to encourage young people's inclusive representation and participation in local, national, regional and international decision-making, as well as in mechanisms for conflict resolution and prevention, efforts to counter violent extremism, supporting peace processes, disarmament and reintegration, and other peacebuilding efforts.[1]

Since 2015, many parts of the United Nations (UN) system, as well as regional organizations, Member States, civil society organizations (CSOs) and other actors have put significant effort behind advancing the YPS agenda, among them the Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund (PBF), which has given substantial support to engaging youth in peacebuilding programming and in conflict prevention. In addition to a specific funding modality known as the Youth Promotion Initiative (YPI), which was introduced in 2016, the 2020–2024 PBF Strategy set an internal annual target for 25 per cent of funding to support empowerment of women and youth.[2] Between 2018 and 2024, through 167 projects across 48 countries and territories, the PBF invested more than $311 million towards the implementation of the YPS agenda.[3] This Review considers how this type of programming contributes to advancing the YPS agenda, in particular the participation pillar, by drawing best practices or lessons learned from 41 PBF-supported projects approved from 2018 to 2022.

Impact of youth-focused programming on the advancement of the YPS agenda

The projects demonstrated numerous ways that peacebuilding programming can help advance the YPS agenda. The initiatives within them helped expand space for youth participation and engagement in decision-making at local, national and regional levels by establishing or supporting youth councils or other representative bodies; by fostering linkages and dialogue with key stakeholders; and creating channels for youth input and engagement on a range of issues. Several projects fostered youth networks or YPS coalitions or facilitated the development of National Action Plans on YPS or other national strategies or policies on youth. Peacebuilding programming also helped support the active engagement of young people in key peace and security processes, including youth inclusion in post-conflict transition processes, involving youth networks in conflict monitoring and local mediation, and involving youth in emerging programming related to Climate, Peace and Security (CPS).

In addition to taking forward key YPS objectives, the projects provided further evidence of how youth involvement can meaningfully advance peacebuilding and conflict prevention. Young people who took part in local councils or dispute resolution bodies proved able to help mediate and defuse local sources of conflict and tension, resulting in lowered rates of violence and increased prospects for conflict prevention in these communities. They did so not just by dealing with disputes between youth, but also by helping to address and forestall broader community disputes and tensions. Young people brought different viewpoints and bases of knowledge, such that when included, they tangibly improved efforts to address root causes and drivers of conflict. For example, in projects focused on the management of natural resources and the nexus between conflict and environmental stressors, young people were often the first to understand the impact of climate change, and to both propose and embrace new technologies, techniques and community management strategies to help mitigate its effects.

Although in some countries the space for youth engagement was quite closed, in others, engagement via youth proved to be a neutral meeting ground, with certain groups of youth able to engage despite local or regional faultlines. Youth exchanges were the vanguard of efforts to encourage regional peacebuilding and reconciliation in the Western Balkans. Youth were seen as peacebuilding intermediaries in Somalia, able to bridge clan lines in ways that other sectors of the population could not, to broker cooperation and reduce intercommunal conflict. Although they faced challenging contexts, projects like the one supporting a conflict monitoring network in Sudan showed that youth have a role to play not only in prevention and post-conflict peacebuilding, but also in helping mitigate and manage the effects of ongoing conflicts.

Learning on best practices and key strategies

The projects illustrated a number of best practices, and also provided valuable lessons on how to navigate some persistent issues in youth-focused peacebuilding. Many of the challenges that these projects responded to – discrimination or stigma against youth, high levels of youth poverty or unemployment, or lack of educational opportunities – exist on such a large scale that they can be

difficult to tackle through small-scale programming. To even try to catalyse larger and more sustainable changes, as PBF support is often intended to do, may require significantly longer duration than is typical in PBF-supported projects (just over 24 months in this sample).

Given the scale of the challenges, each individual youth-focused peacebuilding project must be thought of as part of a larger chain of youth engagement and empowerment. One project might help lay the foundation for youth empowerment by investing in youth capacities and networks, or nudge forward incremental gains in involving young people in dispute resolution or local community discussions by building on past programming or successful local models. Then, where windows of opportunity arise, these past investments in youth capacities and incremental gains can be built upon for more substantial gains and successes. For these reasons, the PBF, or other funding partners in this space, should not be hesitant to support iterative or sequential programming, which can achieve discrete project results and catalytic effects within any given project, but also build on past investments to ensure greater continuity and sustainability.[4] The findings suggest that supporting this iterative and sequential approach can be particularly important in trying to scale up youth participatory mechanisms and initiatives from a local level to a national or regional level.

The projects also illustrated how particular project components and strategies can help in overcoming some of the barriers to youth participation. Individual empowerment was incredibly important, with many projects supporting young people's ability to be knowledgeable, active participants. However, equally important were investments in platforms or networks for supporting young people to engage collectively. These mechanisms and platforms helped surmount access barriers and anchor youth voices within broader decision-making spaces, ultimately allowing efforts towards individual transformation and advocacy to become more than the sum of their parts.

Attention to young people's socioeconomic needs and vulnerabilities, and enabling opportunities for young people to showcase what they can do, also featured as some of the most successful strategies. Addressing young people's socioeconomic vulnerabilities can be a prerequisite to their participation in other arenas, both because it helps address youth needs, freeing them to then take action elsewhere, but also because it affords youth a more equivalent status and position to engage with credibility. The projects dealing with climate and other environmental peacebuilding issues proved to be a particularly strong example of the importance of socioeconomic considerations and livelihood strategies. Many of these projects focus on land issues and natural resources, which sit at the core of community concerns. Involving young people in such work enabled them to have an impact on critical issues for their community, on their own livelihoods and economic futures, and on issues viewed as root causes of conflict. Yet, although there are many natural synergies between YPS and CPS, so far the level of programming in this space is limited. Given how promising this is as an area for youth engagement, and how much young people can bring to CPS, there is much more room for investment.

The idea of allowing young people to showcase what they can do went beyond the realm of climate and environmental programming, however; whether it was allowing youth to establish community service initiatives, resolve local disputes, act as messengers of peace, or design their own peacebuilding campaigns, projects that showcased youth's ability to contribute appeared far more effective at dismantling stigmas and stereotypes than intervention strategies premised on simply communicating youth's potential. Such approaches also limited the risk of tokenistic youth involvement in programmes, and helped carry forward the key goals underlying the participation pillar of the YPS agenda.

This Review also paid attention to emerging practice on intersectional work, and to strategies for the protection and inclusion of marginalized and vulnerable youth. Many youth activists, civil society partners and UN entities have been pushing hard to strengthen such considerations and mainstream them across all youth programming. Nonetheless, the project experiences and expert interviews suggest that fully seeing through commitments for diverse engagement and the protection needs of certain youth are outstanding challenges for the field. Interlocuters noted accessibility concerns, many of which could be addressed by additional budget provisions or more extensive preparation. Many also called for more structural measures – with safeguarding measures built into budgets, protocols and project design modalities – as a way to reinforce the rhetorical support for this area.

In terms of partnerships with young people and youth organizations, new models for grant-giving and co-partnership in implementation of projects have enabled more local organizations, including those led by young people, to lead on YPS initiatives. This includes models of seed-funding and subgrant-giving that have allowed young people to take forward their own initiatives, as well as efforts to involve young people more in everything from

project design to monitoring and evaluating projects. However, a general issue in the field (not specific to work supported by the PBF) is that there is still insufficient youth input and ownership over the design and implementation of peacebuilding programming, and only a small trickle of funding towards YPS goes directly to youth organizations.

Recommendations and next steps

The Review pointed to the importance of youth-focused and youth-led programming in peacebuilding as well as the PBF's leading role in this respect. In the interviews, a large number of the implementing partners and representatives of UN entities observed that youth inclusion is considered almost a necessary element within any programming proposed for PBF funding, signalling the priority that has been given to this area. Nonetheless, those interviewed suggested a number of additional steps to strengthen youth programming and advancement of the YPS agenda, both via work supported by the PBF and by strategies or practices taken up by other practitioners or funding partners.

- **Create opportunities for youth to lead, and to showcase their abilities.** Whether involving youth in community planning, renovation or other public works, or giving youth the chance to spearhead conflict resolution or community awareness, allowing youth to "show by doing" is important in dismantling stigmas and barriers to further participation.
- **Consider socioeconomic needs and components in nearly all youth peacebuilding programming.** Socioeconomic concerns were so central to youth exclusion and vulnerability, and economic participation proved to be such a lynchpin for other forms of youth participation, that it would be hard to have strong catalytic effects and impact without some attention to these issues.
- **Invest in platforms, structures or networks of youth,** including youth councils or representative bodies, youth activism platforms or networks, and youth-led organizations. Identifying more routes to financially support youth-led organizations to build a track record, potentially through small-to-medium grants that also involve capacity development, would over time lead to a more youth-driven YPS field.
- **Consider more flexible and localized funding modalities, including seed-funding and subgrant modalities.** These can be more accessible to youth organizations, as they often allow more flexible and locally adapted proposal processes. To empower youth organizations, it is also important to build in capacity-building support for project management and budgetary training.
- **Consider opportunities for sequential funding.** Given the incremental or sequential nature of the field, catalytic funding mechanisms like the PBF could potentially support synced or sequential funding strategies so that project teams have an opportunity to build on past successes, or create pathways for scaling catalytic change where successful models are identified.
- **Ensure that project timelines and budgets allow sufficient time for engagement and sensitization on the project at the outset.** This is necessary for overcoming stigma, gaining support and greater engagement from local stakeholders, and ensuring sufficient trust from the youth involved.
- **Build from adequate local foundations when considering national or regional youth platforms or strategies.** Otherwise, there is too high a risk of the national or regional mechanisms and initiatives not coming together or doing so only in a tokenistic way.
- **When considering cross-border or regional programming, ensure sufficient partnership support and interest among key stakeholders at all levels, and a strong fit between the theory of change and the cross-border or regional modality.** Otherwise, given the heavy implementation costs involved in cross-border projects, there is a risk of burdening what might otherwise be highly productive national projects, or of the cross-border or regional elements falling by the wayside.
- **Increase duration and/or start-up time for certain project modalities.** Given the additional administrative and transactional complexity of cross-border or regional projects, it may be necessary to increase the maximum duration of these projects, or at least allow such projects a pre-start-up period before implementation begins.
- **Support the piloting of youth-centred CPS programming in more areas,** specifically paying attention to young people's role in climate adaptation, as well as in other environmental and natural resources-related conflict prevention. Within these projects, invest in greater monitoring, evaluation and learning, and more longitudinal studies of youth-centred CPS work to fill the gap in current learning.
- **Continue to prioritize YPS commitments to diverse youth inclusion,** enabling those from all genders, ethnic and religious identities, and different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds to participate equally in peacebuilding and conflict resolution initiatives. This requires not only a continued emphasis on mainstreaming diverse inclusion across all programming (not limited to youth programming), but also continued support for

developing intersectional approaches, and for more innovative outreach strategies.

- **Supporting an intersectional approach will require allowing for greater investment of staff time and resources,** including more time at the outset of the project for outreach, trust-building and development of safeguards, and sufficient budget and planning time to facilitate access and other accommodations. Additionally, implementers may have to put additional efforts into outreach to participants, their families and surrounding community figures, to ensure a sufficiently open and safe space for inclusion of previously marginalized youth. To reinforce "do no harm" and protection standards, part of the project budget could be earmarked for responding to protection risks or threats that might arise.
- **Consider developing a "road map" and checklists of best practices on inclusion and protection standards.** Practitioners might consider developing checklists with simple reminders or a repository of practical tips, such as lists of accessible and secure venues and transport options, to help preserve institutional memory and remind staff of potential accommodation options for diverse youth. A road map at the start of the project could help activate use of these checklists.
- **Establish clear, transparent participant selection criteria.** This promotes inclusivity, establishes a foundation for building trust and mitigates the risk of selection bias from implementing partners.
- **Encourage more effective appraisal of YPS results** by supporting collection of data on indicators that go beyond activity counts, as well as greater data tracking of participants or beneficiaries by both age and other identity markers.
- **Develop means for greater transparency and tracking of funding that goes to youth-led or youth-focused organizations,** similar to recent efforts of the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) to collect subgrantee funding data. Consistent efforts by a wide range of UN entities, Member States, other funders and implementing partners would be needed to begin to fill the blanks in this "data-poor" field. Within PBSO's aggregated data tracking on subpartners, more consistent coding of the subgrantee categories (including of youth), enabling coding of an organization by more than one category as appropriate (e.g. a CSO working on women and youth), and consolidated tracking at the conclusion of the project, rather than iterative tracking, might yield more usable databases that can enable identification of the share of funding going to youth organizations.
- **Include youth directly in monitoring, learning and evaluation exercises.** This will help enhance accountability and increase young people's influence in shaping youth programming, as illustrated in two projects in this Review (Sri Lanka PBF/IRF-329 and CAR PBF/IRF-334).

Endnotes

1 Additional supporting Security Council resolutions for the YPS agenda include: S/RES/2419 (2018); the Presidential Statement on YPS (S/PRST/2019/15) adopted in December 2019; and S/RES/2535 (2020). There were also references to the importance of youth in conflict prevention, and of youth inclusion in peacebuilding in the 2016 twin "sustaining peace" resolutions, S/RES/2282 (2016) and A/RES/70/262 (2016). Also relevant is a 2021 resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly, based on the report of the Third Committee, A/RES/76/137 (2021).

2 United Nations Peacebuilding, *Security-General's Peacebuilding Fund: 2020–2024 Strategy* (2020).

3 Information provided by PBSO, based on calculating the amounts allocated to all projects approved from 2018 to 2023 that were either funded through the YPI or had a primary focus on youth, as identified in PBSO internal tracking.

4 Previous PBF Thematic Reviews have also recommended to PBSO that it should consider iterative or serial projects, "particularly in situations where more adaptive and sequential programming strategies would be likely to advance strategic priorities and leverage particular moments or opportunities for peacebuilding advancement". Erica Gaston and others, *2024 PBF Thematic Review: Synergies between Human Rights and Peacebuilding in PBF-supported Programming* (New York, United Nations University, 2024), p. 7.

United Nations University
Centre for Policy Research

About UNU-CPR

United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR) is a think tank within the United Nations that carries out policy-focused research on issues of strategic interest and importance to the United Nations and its Member States. UNU-CPR prioritizes urgent policy needs requiring innovative, practical solutions oriented towards immediate implementation.

The Centre offers deep knowledge of the multilateral system and an extensive network of partners within and outside of the United Nations. The United Nations University Charter, formally adopted by the General Assembly in 1973, endows the Centre with academic independence which ensures that its research is impartial and grounded in an objective assessment of policy and practice.

cpr.unu.edu

New York (Headquarters)
767 Third Avenue 35B
New York, NY 10017
United States
Tel: +1-646-905-5225
Email: comms-cpr@unu.edu

Geneva
Maison de la Paix
Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2E
Geneva, Switzerland
Tel: +1-917-225-0199
Email: comms-cpr@unu.edu