Youth participation in local or community-level decision-making, peacebuilding and conflict prevention

Cohort 1 of the 2025 Peacebuilding Fund Thematic Review on Youth, Peace and Security

May 2025

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The research findings in this brief stem from a larger research study into youth-focused peacebuilding programming, the 2025 Peacebuilding Fund Thematic Review on Youth, Peace and Security. The research assessed 41 projects approved by the Peacebuilding Fund between 2018 and 2022, with analysis organized into 4 cohorts examining specific practice areas or types of youth programming. This research brief draws findings and material from the Thematic Review as they relate to the first cohort, on the practices and effects of youth inclusion in local peacebuilding, and also incorporates additional material developed in the course of research.

Introduction

The landmark Security Council resolution 2250 (2015) on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) recognized the important contribution of young people to the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security.[2] It identified five key pillars for action: participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and disarmament and reintegration. Since the resolution, taking forward the YPS agenda has been a key priority not only at the policy level but also in programming across the United Nations (UN) system and its partner organizations, among them the Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund (PBF). Between 2018 and 2023, through 161 projects across 48 countries and territories, the PBF invested more than $291 million towards the implementation of the YPS agenda.[3] In keeping with the approach of the peacebuilding sector, the vast majority of this PBF-supported programming takes place at the local or community level – for example, engaging young people in local or community-based decision-making forums, conflict resolution, and conflict prevention

mechanisms or other forms of "bottom-up" or local peacebuilding.[4] This cohort study considers some of the lessons learned from that local-level engagement and peacebuilding programming, as part of a larger year-long Thematic Review of the PBF's support for youth programming and advancing the YPS agenda, in particular as relates to the participation pillar.[5]

Youth engagement and participation in local peacebuilding has strong potential to deliver dividends. Although highly context-specific, local governance structures, whether formal or informal, can be easier to navigate and can be more fluid than other levels of governance, which can allow room for experimentation and for newcomers such as youth to engage. The 2018 *Missing Peace* study (commissioned as a key follow-up to resolution 2250), suggests that "where working with government can be difficult at the national level, young people are often able to collaborate with local authorities, traditional leaders, or urban local governments".[6] Young people also often have greater familiarity with local actors and institutions as well as with the dynamics of their

own communities (at least more so than in national peacebuilding or decision-making mechanisms).[7] The 2017–2019 PBF Synthesis Review supports this: "Local non-governmental actors, including youth, often have more immediate and trusted connections to vital areas and communities, as well as a continuous presence in the country, in contrast to international actors."[8] As a result, it is within this level of local governance that young people have the most chance of participation, and to witness the direct impact of their involvement on their communities.

Moreover, young people have substantial contributions to make at the local level. The *Missing Peace* study noted that not only is the local level sometimes more accessible to youth, but also that young people have a unique ability to contribute to conflict prevention given their vantage point within communities. Within the context of security sector reform, for example, the study framed young people as an important potential "interface between communities and governments", uniquely positioned to improve accountability and reduce the risk of violence linked to it.[9] Youth contributions to local peacebuilding contexts have also been recognized as important for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in local contexts.[10] For all these reasons, the Secretary-General in 2020 emphasized the importance of extending the focus beyond national or central government actors and processes to support "locally owned, led, and implemented peacebuilding activities".[11]

While there has been widespread recognition of the importance of youth participation in peacebuilding and conflict prevention, past studies and initiatives have also highlighted several barriers to making progress on the YPS agenda. Persistent political, economic and social exclusion, along with a lack of proactive national efforts to engage young people, are frequently cited as obstacles to increased participation. The *Missing Peace* study identified a number of "structural" barriers pointing to high levels of youth unemployment, "hindering [young people's] ability to plan for the future", negative stereotypes, distrust of political leaders and institutions, political underrepresentation and low literacy rates.[12] To counter these trends, the study stressed the need to invest in young people's capacities and networks and prioritize collaborative action by treating youth as equal partners.[13]

Many of these barriers still persist in the communities featured in this study. In some contexts, overall higher rates of youth unemployment, illiteracy and limited access to resources still hinder young people's ability to engage.[14] Across nearly all of the contexts examined, young people face exclusion from decision-making or conflict prevention forums. Most local governance mechanisms, whether formal or informal, are still hierarchical models dominated by community "elders" and have limited to no inclusion of youth. Significant participation in community or government-linked forums requires established credibility through past experience or significant economic resources, which often rules out young people. Additionally, stigma against youth – either as not capable or not "ready" to make a substantial contribution – further reinforces their exclusion from community decision-making, and other forms of civic, political and economic participation. In many communities, government officials, elders or other stakeholders in positions of power were fearful or suspicious of youth, either about the potential for them to engage in violence or negative behaviour, or because the demands for change and reform put forward by youth were not in their interest.

Given these outstanding challenges, there is still much learning to be done on how to enable young people to overcome these barriers, and to fully realize the participation pillar of the YPS agenda. In addition, notwithstanding strong global messaging within the peacebuilding community about the potential benefits of youth inclusion, there is still a need to build a stronger evidence base around the results of investments into YPS, and particularly around young people's participation in peacebuilding. Closer examination of the key results, good practices and outstanding challenges within peacebuilding programming in this area would help fill this larger knowledge gap in the field.

As part of the research conducted for the *2025 PBF Thematic Review on Youth, Peace and Security*, this cohort analysis examines 12 PBF-supported projects related to youth inclusion and participation in local peacebuilding. The goal is to deepen the understanding of effective strategies and opportunities to foster youth participation at the local level and the impacts thereof. The analysis explores key questions, including: What opportunities are available at the local or community level for increasing youth engagement and participation, and taking forward the YPS agenda? How does youth participation and engagement at this level contribute to community well-being, social cohesion and conflict prevention? What barriers persist at the local level, and what strategies can help overcome these challenges?

The analysis suggests that enhancing youth engagement at the local level yields significant benefits for both young people and their communities, helping enhance social cohesion and mitigate community tensions. When young

people are actively involved in decision-making and conflict resolution, meaningful change can take root. Strengthening community initiatives to include young people often brings tangible results for social cohesion and peaceful coexistence within communities, but for these efforts to be sustainable, local backing is crucial. These findings reinforce current policies that recognize the vital role that young people have to play in a range of peace and security contexts.

This brief begins by providing an overview of the 12 projects, their goals and strategies, identifying common themes. It then explores key project outcomes and insights, focusing on how youth participation contributes to conflict prevention, how intergenerational mistrust and narratives around young people influence their peacebuilding capabilities, the importance of meaningful youth engagement, and the role of economic empowerment in sustainable peacebuilding. Finally, the conclusion and recommendations underscore actionable steps for strengthening youth inclusion in local peace efforts, inviting renewed commitment to this agenda as a path to lasting community resilience.

Overview of projects

Key information	Year Approved	Name	Implementing Partners**
CAR PBF/IRF-468 (YPI) $800,000 2022-2023	2021	Strengthening conflict prevention by increasing youth engagement in local mediation processes in the Bamingui-Bangoran Region in CAR	Search for Common Ground
Chad PBF/IRF-263 (YPI) $1,500,000 2018-2020	2018	Renforcement de la participation et de la représentation de la jeunesse dans les mécanismes de prévention et de gestion des conflits au niveau communautaire	UNFPA, UNESCO
Colombia PBF/IRF-455 (YPI) $1,400,000 2022-2023	2021	Espacios cívicos juveniles para la resiliencia y la reconciliación en el Pacífico colombiano	UNICEF, UNFPA, ILO
DRC PBF/IRF-262 (YPI) $1,396,343 2018-2020	2018	Renforcer la participation des jeunes leaders Twa & Bantous aux comites locaux de paix "BARAZA 1" pour la consolidation de la paix et la cohésion sociale dans la province du TANGANYIKA	UNFPA, FAO, UNESCO
El Salvador PBF/IRF-414 (YPI) $1,499,530 2021-2022	2020	Juventudes salvadoreñas construyendo paz y resiliencia: Derecho a ciudadanía participativa e incidencia en los municipios de Jiquilisco y Tecoluca	UNFPA, UNESCO, Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy
Guinea PBF/IRF-264 (YPI) $1,442,360 2018-2020	2018	Projet d'appui à la participation des jeunes hommes et jeunes femmes à la gouvernance dans les 20 communes les plus conflictogènes de la Guinée	UNFPA, UNICEF, UNESCO

Key information	Year Approved	Name	Implementing Partners**
Liberia PBF/LBR/D-15 $1,400,001 2019-2021	2018	Socio-Economic Empowerment of Disadvantaged (SEED) Youth in Liberia	Liberia UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund
Sierra Leone PBF/SLE/D-3 $3,000,000 2020-2023	2020	Empowering youth at risk as resources for sustaining peace and community resilience in Tonkolili and Kenema districts in Sierra Leone	FAO, UNDP, UNFPA
Solomon Islands PBF/IRF-472 (YPI) $1,499,960 2022-2024	2021	Bridging traditional governance and rule of law through youths' participation as agents of peace and change in Rennel and Bellona	World Vision, UNDP
Tunisia PBF/IRF-288 (YPI) $2,998,889 2018-2020	2018	Pérenniser la paix en Tunisie par l'inclusion des jeunes au niveau local	UNDP, UNESCO, UN Women
Uganda PBF/IRF-303 $2,487,750 2019-2021	2019	Harnessing the youth's potential for sustaining peace in Uganda	UNDP, UNFPA, OHCHR
Burundi* PBF/IRF-316 (YPI) $1,500,000 2019-2021	2019	Community-based prevention of violence and social cohesion using innovation for young people in displaced and host communities	UNICEF, UNFPA

*The Burundi project was selected for this Review sample, but interviewees were not available to comment on its implementation, so it has largely been excluded from the analysis.

**For reasons of space, acronyms for all UN entities are not spelled out in this table, but are listed in the Thematic Review.

The research for this brief was conducted as part of the broader research for the *2025 PBF Thematic Review on Youth, Peace and Security*.[15] Both in the larger Review sample and in this cohort, the majority of projects were implemented in Africa (71 per cent in the larger Review sample, 66 per cent in this cohort), predominantly in Central and West Africa. Ten of the 12 projects are funded through the Youth Promotion Initiative (YPI), which was a specific funding modality within the PBF that was aimed at enhancing youth-focused programming and themes within the projects it supported.[16] The projects in this cohort are implemented primarily by UN entities, including the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (eight), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

(UNESCO) (five), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (four). However, there was often substantial engagement of civil society organizations (CSOs), and of youth engagement, at the level of implementation. In the project in Colombia (PBF/IRF-455), for example, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), UNFPA and the International Labour Organization (ILO) were the direct implementing partners, but they together allocated 42 per cent of the funding to the Colombia chapter of a large international non-governmental organization (NGO), SOS Children's Village, and a well-established Colombian CSO, Movilizatorio, that works on social engagement.

All projects were chosen for their focus on involving youth directly in local peace efforts, from conflict resolution workshops to community dialogues. Many of the projects in this cohort were centred around involving youth in local decision-making, conflict prevention and peacebuilding mechanisms. A key barrier to this in many communities is the limited access that young people have to arenas of decision-making. Projects in this cohort frequently sought to overcome these access issues by establishing standing mechanisms for engagement and creating connections with local decision makers and stakeholders.

Many of the projects worked on expanding youth involvement in existing platforms, mechanisms or forums with an aim to make them more inclusive, for example:

- In Solomon Islands, the project PBF/IRF-472 allowed young people to voice their grievances and ideas on community management to elders by modernizing traditional Maui communication practices, using facilitated forums and meetings to ensure their participation in decision-making.
- In the project PBF/IRF-414 in El Salvador, young people were integrated into existing Municipal Committees for the Prevention of Violence, which were engaged in regular consultations with local governance actors on ways to prevent or mitigate sources of violence.[17]
- In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), local youth peace committees known as "*baraza*" that were involved in local conflict mediation and resolution were strengthened and expanded both geographically and in terms of representation in the project PBF/IRF-262.

Other projets established new mechanisms or platforms for youth inclusion. For example:

- A central element in the project PBF/IRF-264 in Guinea was to form local youth councils in conflict-prone areas where youth contributed to tensions, providing an alternative for them to express grievances, but also contribut to the community by working closely with municipal leaders.
- In Colombia, following a series of youth-led national strikes that turned violent, the project PBF/IRF-455 established local youth assemblies in two of the most affected regions, allowing participants to develop advocacy strategies focused on youth grievances, providing peaceful mechanisms that had not previously existed.

Beyond creating new mechanisms or strengthening existing ones, other projects facilitated more regular or structured engagement between youth and local decision makers or fostered linkage strategies between youth and these government processes and mechanisms as a way to overcome access barriers. For example:

- In Tunisia, to counter intergenerational mistrust, the project PBF/IRF-288 focused on rebuilding dialogue between municipal leaders and young people, and involving youth in community projects through the organization of joint workshops and training.
- In Uganda, the project PBF/IRF-303 convened national dialogues between members of parliament and youth in the Kasese district, an opposition stronghold vulnerable to electoral tensions. More than a dozen young people selected from local and national youth councils engaged with seasoned parliamentarians to offer youth perspectives on public policy, strengthening youth involvement in governance.

As indicated in some of the project descriptions above, barriers to youth participation can also stem from prevailing negative narratives and stigma against youth. Many of the project documents (ProDocs) had identified older generations as holding negative stereotypes about youth, and sought to address this by facilitating intergenerational dialogue and awareness. For example:

- Intergenerational dialogue was a major part of the activities in the project PBF/IRF-263 in Chad. The project facilitated intergenerational dialogues in the Nya Pendé and Barh Sara regions, which ultimately resulted in the drafting of an intergenerational charter.
- In the project in the Rennel and Bellona areas of Solomon Islands (PBF/IRF-472), a series of structured intergenerational dialogues were used to counter stereotypes held by elders of youth as incapable or uninterested in community affairs, and to allow the young people involved to express their grievances and engage more actively in community matters (including those related to land management vis-à-vis nearby extractive industries).

Recognizing that some media and cultural narratives are significant drivers of youth stigma, many projects organized activities related to media promotion or community sensitization (see table 1). Youth engagement with media itself can be a key aspect of peacebuilding. By appearing in public media and spreading messages of peace, youth can reclaim the narrative and demonstrate their agency. In this sense, the more significant peacebuilding achievement of some projects was the participants' direct engagement with the media itself.[18]

- In the project in Uganda (PBF/IRF-303), youth were supported to develop media campaigns and youth-led "entertainment education" (including a highly popular local song) to promote messages of social cohesion, encourage inclusive community dialogue and amplify peacebuilding messages in the mainstream media.
- In the Central African Republic (CAR) youth, especially Muslim youth, have often been stigmatized as the primary perpetrators of violence amid political instability. In the project PBF/IRF-468 in CAR, the team partnered with the popular Radio Ndélé Pas Loin to broadcast youth-led programmes that promoted peaceful engagement and violence prevention.

While promoting intergenerational dialogue and positive narratives about youth were deemed important, many of the projects sought to go beyond this and enabled opportunities for youth to prove themselves as a way to counter stigma. For example, part of the rationale for enabling youth to lead conflict mediation efforts in the project in DRC (PBF/IRF-262) and the project PBF/IRF-468 in CAR (Twa and Bantu conflicts in the former and farmer–herder conflicts in the latter) was that it would shift negative perceptions about youth, specifically disproving narratives that associate them primarily with violence.[19] The motivation behind these activities was the idea that providing pathways for youth to positively engage in their communities could be a way to counter stigma, and enhance youth credibility as political stakeholders.

Intersecting with some of the access and stigma issues was the larger barrier of youth socioeconomic needs and vulnerabilities. Most of the projects incorporated a socioeconomic component as a central part of their theory of change or key activities. The most common rationale was that youth exclusion, and/or their susceptibility to participation in violence or extremism, was linked to high youth unemployment rates and lack of income. In the projects in Liberia (PBF/LBR/D-15) and Sierra Leone (PBF/SLE/D-3), for instance, reducing youth vulnerability to violence and crime through socioeconomic initiatives was viewed as a crucial strategy for mitigating the risks of future violence or violent extremism, while also empowering youth as vital contributors to community resilience and stability.[20] Many of the projects therefore incorporated income-generating or livelihood support activities, alongside other youth empowerment or inclusion strategies. For example:

- In the project in Sierra Leone (PBF/SLE/D-3), in addition to being provided with "cash for work" programmes and lessons on financial literacy, young people were connected with industry leaders through mentorships in fields like poultry farming, enabling participants to secure jobs or apprenticeships.
- In the project in Uganda (PBF/IRF-303), youth were provided career counselling and skills training to guide them towards employment opportunities in fields like hairdressing, tailoring and mechanics.
- In the project in Liberia (PBF/LBR/D-15), the project team partnered with private sector actors to help young people identify viable livelihoods and provided personalized career counselling.

A number of projects also centred around socioeconomic issues, but less in the sense of addressing youth livelihood needs, and more in promoting young people's role in economic sectors and in addressing local socioeconomic issues as part of realizing their participation in key community spheres.

- In two communities in which the project PBF/IRF-264 in Guinea was implemented, local youth councils allowed young people to have a greater voice in the extractive industry, addressing grievances about mining sector management. These were seen as key drivers of ongoing conflict by implementing partners and community members themselves.
- In the projects in Sierra Leone (PBF/SLE/D-3) and Solomon Islands (PBF/IRF-472), part of the outcome of the youth empowerment and engagement strategies was that youth would not only participate in community decision-making or conflict resolution forums, but also would participate in decision-making related to economic sectors and livelihoods, such as in local land management. This was an important extension of youth engagement at a local level because land management had traditionally been the domain of community elders. Interestingly, in both projects, youth engagement extended to considering the impact of outside investors or private sector actors whose land-use or investment decisions could affect community lands. In Solomon Islands, for example, youth actively engaged with members of the private sector (i.e. the extractive industry) to advocate for community interests.

Key findings and project learning

The review of these 12 PBF-supported projects highlights the significant impact of youth inclusion in local peacebuilding efforts. Across diverse contexts, these projects demonstrated that youth engagement in decision-making and conflict prevention can significantly contribute to local conflict prevention, conflict resolution, peacebuilding and community resilience. Initiatives that empowered youth councils, fostered local networks, and trained youth in conflict resolution and leadership allowed young people to play active roles in addressing community tensions and preventing violence. Moreover, projects showed that young people who were engaged as equal stakeholders – not just beneficiaries – introduced innovative solutions and new perspectives that enriched peacebuilding.

To help overcome young people's lack of access to many peacebuilding and decision-making spaces and forums, a common approach identified across the projects was to build local peace infrastructures and spaces that bridge youth and local governance actors, creating or strengthening essential channels for incorporating youth perspectives into community decision-making and conflict resolution efforts (Guinea PBF/IRF-264, Colombia PBF/IRF-455, Tunisia PBF/IRF-288, Uganda PBF/IRF-303, Chad PBF/IRF-263, Solomon Islands PBF/IRF-472). Such strategies often reflect the belief that actively involving young people in decision-making and providing constructive outlets for their grievances can redirect their energies from potential violence towards peaceful engagement, reducing immediate violence and fostering long-term stability. The theory of change as drafted by the implementing partners of the Ugandan project, for example, states "If the young women and young men in Central/Buganda and Ruwenzori regions [the site of project implementation] are mobilized and empowered to peacefully engage … Then [they] will be able to act as effective change agents for inclusive and peaceful decision-making processes and [sic] national, district and local level and will be less likely to nurture frustration linked to a sense of exclusion."[21]

This approach appeared to yield tangible outcomes in addressing security challenges and containing violence, particularly in contexts where young people had contributed to conflicts. One of the most important examples of the link between increasing youth participation and successful conflict prevention stemmed from the project PBF/IRF-264 in Guinea. The project sought to increase youth participation by forming local youth councils within the municipal councils in 20 conflict-prone communes within Guinea.

These 20 communes had been identified by a UNFPA study as having a higher risk of violence, as well as harbouring youth that were identified as a significant factor in community tensions.[22] Initially, young people participated in these councils almost as interns, but gradually took on a more significant role – including helping carry out local surveys and data collection, providing feedback on local development plans, fielding community complaints, and identifying other sources of tension and suggesting measures to manage or resolve them.

By the conclusion of the project, in the majority of the target communities, mayors reported significant reductions in communal tensions and improved social cohesion, attributing this predominantly to the inclusion of youth. For example, one interlocuter observed, "We really saw young people calming down; the violence that used to occur had significantly decreased. It was, in part, because they realized they were being heard and that they finally had a voice in decisions that affected them."[23] In most of the communities, there were marked declines in violent protests and altercations between young people from different communities, which local authorities attributed to the project's efforts in enabling legitimate and peaceful means for youth to voice their concerns.

> "The violence that used to occur had significantly decreased. It was, in part, because [youth] realized they were being heard and that they finally had a voice in decisions that affected them." — local partner, on effects of youth local councils

In the mining community of Kolaboui, the Mayor reported no major incidents over the prior 11 months, attributing this stability largely to efforts to keep youth informed and involved.[24] By inviting them to village town halls and ensuring that they were kept in the loop of community deliberations, young people's sense of being valued and involved as community members increased significantly, along with their awareness of non-violent alternatives. This idea that informing and involving youth could contribute to violence reduction was seconded by one of the youth council members in Kolaboui. He noted that before the project, young people knew little about what was happening in the community, but that this began to shift with their engagement in the project. His broader lesson on youth engagement and conflict prevention was that "at a

minimum, we have to be informed … even just knowing helped in calming things down".[25]

The contributions of young people to conflict prevention could also be seen in the way that the youth representatives in these councils helped manage community tensions. For example, in one community that had been prone to tensions with mining companies, young people gradually took on the role of intermediaries, managing complaints between community leaders and mining companies. In others, they acted as intermediaries and "peace ambassadors" with their peers. As a former youth council member described their role: "We consulted with the youth and discussed their concerns with them. We told them about the new youth council and how that provided them with resources for peaceful ways to have their grievances heard."[26] The young people were widely lauded for their efforts, and leading representatives of the commune even "expressed regret for not involving them sooner".[27] Former members of one of the local youth councils recalled that the former mayor, although initially hesitant about the value of engaging with youth, was moved to tears during the handover ceremony at the end of their mandate, acknowledging the significant impact they had made.[28]

Another example of how enabling youth access to decision-making forums can help de-escalate highly tense situations was provided by the project in Colombia (PBF/IRF-455). During 2019 and 2020, the country experienced a wave of protests, some of the largest mass demonstrations experienced in recent years. Hundreds of thousands of Colombians, including a substantial number of young people, took to the streets protesting against income inequality, corruption, police brutality, and proposed economic and political reforms. While most protests were peaceful, some violent incidents occurred, leading to curfews in key cities like Cali and Bogotá in 2019.

Local and national authorities initially attempted to de-escalate the situation through repressive law enforcement interspersed with trying to reach out to the young people seen as instigators of these protests, but their efforts proved largely ineffective due to the lack of any real channels of communication with the protestors, particularly the youth. This failure to effectively engage youth highlighted the absence of peaceful grievance mechanisms. As implementing partners explained, "Many young people felt that taking to the streets was their only option to voice their concerns." To try to respond to this gap, the project team established local youth assemblies, which designed advocacy strategies focused on issues like inequality in employment, education and politics, and other grievances.

These assemblies presented their proposals and collaborated closely with mayoral offices. They became well-established and credible counterparts for governance actors, not only at the local level but also at the national level. This was especially true for marginalized Afro-Colombian youth, who are disproportionately affected by gang violence in Colombia and are even less likely to have any means to engage or communicate with governance structures. A young Afro-Colombian woman, who knew people in gangs but was not a member, joined the project and later shared that the training and empowerment she received was crucial in enabling her to pursue political science studies and eventually engage in national politics. She also led advocacy efforts in her community, encouraging other youth to work with the Government and "choose a path of peace instead of violence".[29] While recognizing that "individual empowerment alone is not sufficient and that systemic change is needed", implementing partners highlighted this young woman's story as a key achievement of the project that demonstrated that such role modelling could help reduce tensions.[30]

These examples help illustrate that improving young people's access to local decision-making and conflict prevention mechanisms helps reduce community tensions. They suggest that inclusive youth engagement not only strengthens community cohesion but also results in tangible reductions in violence, positioning young people as essential contributors in addressing security and governance challenges.

The projects sought to involve young people in decision-making forums and political dialogue, and also to position them as conflict mediators to help in resolving disputes and mitigating sources of violence. The project in DRC (PBF/IRF-262) focused on addressing long-standing tensions between Twa and Bantu communities in the country's Tanganyika Province. To do so, it built on a pre-existing initiative known as the "*baraza*" local peace committees that was part of community violence reduction efforts led by the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). The project helped expand the geographical reach and representation of these committees at a critical time, when MONUSCO was gradually withdrawing from the region.[31] It provided mediation and community dialogue training to youth affiliated with both the Twa and Bantu groups, equipping them with skills that would help them facilitate constructive intercommunal conversations. As surveyed by project implementers, local authorities reported a significant reduction in tensions, and credited this positive change to the exemplary role youth played in fostering peace by taking the initiative, with the

two groups meeting each other halfway. As one official reported to implementing partners, "It was often the young people who were sent to instigate conflict, yet they were absent from mediation. When they became involved, we saw a real decrease in intercommunal conflicts."[32]

The project illustrates the potential of youth as both a target group and a valuable ally to move beyond conflict resolution towards sustainable peacebuilding. It is also an important example of how to transition to local ownership of conflict resolution processes in contexts like that of MONUSCO's withdrawal, empowering local actors to sustain and deepen peace efforts after transition.

One best practice that ran across several of these projects was that these initiatives appeared more likely to gain traction where projects built on existing initiatives or community mechanisms, rather than starting from scratch. Many of these peacebuilding projects deal with sensitive issues. It can take time to build trust with communities, particularly on an issue of youth inclusion. Thus, building on initiatives that already have a degree of local investment and acceptance can be important, particularly in projects like those supported by the PBF, which are often short in duration. As one of the implementing partners working on the project in DRC (PBF/IRF-262) commented: "It was important to work with mechanisms that communities were already familiar with."[33] In that case, the project was able to expand the local *baraza* peace committees, initially developed by MONUSCO. The previous initiative had done a lot of the heavy lifting of overcoming community scepticism about initiatives promoting intercommunal dialogue. As one young *baraza* member observed (in comments captured in the independent evaluation): "In the beginning, people were sceptical of the idea of Twa and Bantu working together. But when they saw that it was working, more members from the community wanted to join."[34] The project was then able to build from this solid foundation to take the initiative further, expanding it across more geographical areas and being more inclusive of youth and women.[35]

Other projects that successfully built on existing community mechanisms included the projects PBF/IRF-414 in El Salvador and PBF/IRF-468 in CAR. In El Salvador, the project focused on community violence prevention by strengthening an existing "impulse group", a community-based youth network that had already been established to promote change, organize activities and mobilize resources within the community. Rather than introducing new tools, the project built on this established structure, enabling youth to expand activities into other areas of action or different modes of action with the support of a local NGO that was

well rooted in the community. In the project in CAR, implementers were able to build on existing relationships with local peace committees in the Bamingui-Bangoran region that they had invested in under a previous UN-funded (not PBF) project. These local peace committees appeared to be promising local initiatives, but young people in particular struggled to have a full voice in community discussions. The project built on the committees by offering modular training programmes in mediation, conflict resolution and leadership to young people, enhancing their credibility in community dialogue forums. The aim was to foster "positive attitude changes among farmers and herders regarding youth involvement in the community".[36]

Such findings connect to a larger learning from the 2025 Thematic Review: because youth empowerment can be such a challenging area, requiring time and continued effort to overcome stigma and other deeply entrenched barriers to youth participation, those working in the field may need to be strategic and build incrementally from project to project. For these reasons, the PBF, or other partners working in this field, should not be hesitant to support iterative or sequential programming, which can achieve discrete project results and catalytic effects within any given project, while building on the foundations and achievements of other local, national or international initiatives to ensure greater continuity and sustainability.

While the examples above highlight the potential impact of youth inclusion in peacebuilding, they also underscore the importance of creating enabling environments for such involvement. For youth to effectively contribute to conflict resolution and sustaining peace, certain key elements and practices must be in place. The following subsections will explore some of the most common strategies, for doing so, including: efforts to challenge negative narratives about young people, foster greater intergenerational trust and dialogue, support young people's economic participation, and ensure greater community ownership and investment in project activities and mechanisms.

Intergenerational engagement and challenging narratives

Young people's access and ability to participate can be severely limited by the narratives surrounding them, particularly negative stereotypes about their lack of capacity or willingness to contribute positively to local dynamics, which are often rooted in intergenerational mistrust. Faced with this challenge, projects have adopted diverse strategies. Many of the projects sought to address the proliferation of negative stereotypes through intergenerational dialogue

(Solomon Islands PBF/IRF-472, Chad PBF/IRF-263), through positive messaging in the media or in community sensitization campaigns (Uganda PBF/IRF-303, CAR PBF/IRF-468, Tunisia PBF/IRF-288), or by providing opportunities for youth to debunk stereotypes themselves.

In the project in Tunisia (PBF/IRF-288), one of the core issues identified at the outset was that prevailing stereotypes about youth, especially those in the economically marginalized southern regions, as "lazy, illiterate or unskilled", were a block to greater youth participation. There was a strong intergenerational distrust or scepticism, with youth viewed as uninterested or not capable of contributing to communities.[37] To address these issues, the project team involved media representatives in stakeholder workshops and provided targeted training on youth-sensitive media reporting. One implementer noted that "this worked well, as it provided youth with the opportunity to participate directly in radio talk shows, leading to greater satisfaction with how they were portrayed in the public discourse".[38] This media engagement was complemented by support for intergenerational dialogue. The project facilitated dedicated workshops and consultations where young people could engage with community elders, helping to overcome their scepticism.

Implementing partners said that this initial engagement and trust-building phase was crucial at the start of the project, given that many local stakeholders had previously bought into (and even perpetuated) stigmas against youth, including some local officials. While many youth-focused initiatives originate from Government commitments to tackling youth exclusion, these high-level commitments do not always automatically translate into full understanding or support at a local level. In practice, local authorities may still be hesitant or resistant, either due to entrenched biases or a lack of immediate incentives to prioritize youth inclusion. As a result, significant efforts were needed to bridge this gap and create the conditions for these national commitments to have meaningful effect at the local level. One UN official involved in the project's implementation explained: "The involvement of local authorities was a strong indicator of success for this project. It took a lot of time and effort in persuasion to get them engaged, but in the end, it paid off."[39] This was an example of a larger reflection across several of the projects: because of intergenerational mistrust, it often took substantial consultation and outreach with key stakeholders at the start of a project just to be able to commence project activities. A degree of trust-building was needed just to have local officials, elders or stakeholders willingly engage with youth. However, once this was achieved, it could lead to greater impact in the course of a project and more sustainable results (as was also true with the project PBF/IRF-264 in Guinea, discussed earlier).

Media engagement, alongside other community sensitization strategies, featured prominently across five projects in this cohort (Tunisia PBF/IRF-288, CAR PBF/IRF-468, Uganda PBF/IRF-303, Solomon Islands PBF/IRF-472, DRC PBF/IRF-262), proving to be a key tool for shifting perceptions and encouraging youth inclusion. Table 1 offers examples of the different media engagement and community sensitization campaigns employed by project teams to challenge negative narratives about young people.

Media engagement, community campaigns and sensitization strategies

CAR PBF/IRF-468	Mixed teams of young men and women partnered with Radio Ndélé Pas Loin and patrolled the Bamingui-Bangoran region to produce and broadcast four youth-led talk shows centred on farmer–herder conflicts. These programmes featured youth-led discussions on land and environmental disputes and explored community-driven solutions, drawn from their own experiences. Young show hosts shared testimonies and young participants dialled in to highlight their view of the importance of peaceful coexistence and dialogue, and of fostering greater community understanding and collaboration. Surveys conducted during the project's evaluation revealed that 42.4 per cent of the target communities regularly listened to the programmes, with over 85 per cent of surveyed youth saying they tuned in multiple times per day.[40] The project's independent evaluation emphasized the "radio's impact as a powerful tool for awareness-raising" and noted "a significant shift towards dialogue-based conflict resolution and strengthened social cohesion through media-driven sensitization efforts" in the target communities.[41]

Uganda PBF/IRF-303	Identified marginalized youth participated in popular radio, music and television programmes to amplify peacebuilding messages in mainstream media. Implementers conducted an initial survey assessment to identify the most popular radio, music and television programmes among youth, with which they partnered to feature stigmatized youth groups like *boda-boda* riders (local motorcycle drivers) and female street vendors – all individuals with daily interactions across large segments of society and relative social influence. These youth were trained in public speaking and led community sensitization efforts, helping to counter the negative stereotypes they themselves often face. Through these media platforms, they spearheaded peacebuilding initiatives by promoting messages of social cohesion, challenging harmful stereotypes and encouraging inclusive community dialogue. A standout achievement was the project's sponsorship of a song titled "Peace Lover", by popular local artists MalalaUG and Jaffer, which was widely streamed across the country and encouraged young people to embrace and promote peace.[42]
Solomon Islands PBF/IRF-472	Implemented in remote eastern areas where youth were traditionally confined to household roles – girls to housework and boys to livelihood activities – implementers drew on so-called "talk-story" sessions, a culturally rooted practice among the Maoris of Solomon Islands, where community members gather to discuss shared concerns via collective performative storytelling. During these facilitated dialogues, youth voiced grievances on issues such as land disputes, teen pregnancy and substance abuse, while elders – the key community decision makers – were encouraged to listen, reflect and recognize the untapped potential of youth. A key iterative outcome of this community sensitization campaign was the establishment of a youth caucus, a formalized platform that empowered youth to identify challenges that affected them in the community, propose solutions collaboratively and advocate for these in community decision-making forums. Elders reported gaining a deeper understanding of youth struggles, which demonstrated how culturally grounded community-led dialogue and sensitization efforts can evolve into inclusive structures that foster youth empowerment and intergenerational collaboration.

Promoting intergenerational dialogue and addressing negative stereotypes and trust issues also appeared to have potential for more far-reaching effects in terms of strengthening social cohesion and opening up new opportunities for peacebuilding. By resetting the relationship between youth and the elder generation (whether community elders, local authorities or others), a project could potentially have a transformative impact in terms of opening up new avenues for conflict resolution or for sustaining peace. This was one of the reasons that practitioners argued that youth participation and empowerment could be highly catalytic and create a positive impact not just for the youth involved but for the communities as a whole. As an example, the project PBF/IRF-263 in Chad tried to address the large gap in trust and collaboration between youth and others in the community by establishing an intergenerational community platform for conflict prevention and management that culminated in the adoption of an intergenerational charter ("*charte intergenerationnelle*") where both young and old in the community committed to duties and responsibilities, with an emphasis on mutual accountability.[43]

Additionally, the project facilitated the creation of youth umbrella associations that came to work closely with administrative and traditional authorities to peacefully resolve disputes and lead prevention campaigns.[44] Those involved argued that this newfound role of youth in the community transformed how local leaders perceived and interacted with the younger generation.[45] While the long-term effects have yet to manifest, these increased intergenerational interactions were also praised by the project team for "strengthening social cohesion and reducing intercommunal tensions".[46] Young people, particularly young women, also said they perceived it to be a "healthier political environment" for them, and said they felt more integrated, according to the implementing partners involved.[47]

"Show, don't tell": enabling youth action in peacebuilding

While improving access and positive media messaging about young people, facilitating intergenerational dialogue and building trust between young people and other community members is important, empowering them to take an active role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding and to demonstrate their capabilities proved even more transformative. In establishing community service initiatives, acting as messengers of peace and social cohesion, and designing their own media and peacebuilding outreach efforts, young people were allowed to showcase their potential through direct contributions. This appeared

more likely to dismantle stigmas and stereotypes than intervention strategies premised on simply communicating youth's potential. By showcasing young people's contributions, local residents could witness the positive impact of their actions, shifting community perspectives organically through observation rather than instruction. Such approaches also limited the risk of tokenistic youth involvement in programmes, and helped advance the key goals in the participation pillar of the YPS agenda.

In the project in Tunisia (PBF/IRF-288), funds were set aside to directly support 107 youth-led local development projects. One initiative developed by young people was a cellular phone application to track household waste collection, which was highly appreciated by local residents.[48] It enabled youth to demonstrate what they were capable of, showing that when they are involved, they can make a concrete difference in the community. Similarly, when young people involved in some of the youth councils in Guinea (PBF/IRF-264) began to act as intermediaries with mining companies, this offered more tangible proof that they can help address community concerns and sources of community tensions.

"We wanted young people to not only receive peace messages but also to carry them." — local partner on youth leadership of peacebuilding intiatives in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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There were also examples of young people taking the lead in addressing community land management issues in Solomon Islands (PBF/IRF-472) and Sierra Leone (PBF/SLE/D-3). In the Kinema district of Sierra Leone, young project participants engaged with a private sector member, pressing the stakeholder to clarify the intentions behind its investment plan. When it was revealed that the land was intended for illicit drug cultivation, young people involved in the project were among the first to get involved, representing community concerns about this.[49] They were later commended for their proactive stance - another example of how allowing youth to prove themselves can be a powerful way to counter stereotypes. In Solomon Islands, young people lobbied private sector members to ensure tangible benefits for the community in investments. This level of youth involvement was unprecedented in the Rennell and Bellona communitie. According to the traditional authorities consulted for the project's evaluation, the project has led to overall improved relations with members of the extractive industry.[50]

The way in which young people contributed to local mediation and peace messaging efforts in the project in DRC (PBF/IRF-262) was another example of allowing youth to realize their peacebuilding potential. In a baseline study, the project team identified young people who were often at the forefront of community violence as the key group to involve in mediation efforts. With the support of UNESCO, youth from Nyuzu, Kabalo and Kalemie were engaged as mediators and became key voices for peace, using community radio to spread messages of social cohesion. They were trained to organize and participate in radio programmes, bringing together Twa and Bantu young people to foster mutual understanding and collaboration. Implementing partners emphasized this strategy, noting, "We wanted young people to not only receive peace messages but also to carry them."[51] Villagers from both Twa and Bantu communities told implementers that they were deeply moved by witnessing intercommunal marriages between young people from their respective groups, as this highlighted the potential for reconciliation and peace.

Young people's ability to promote peace and social cohesion was also strongly on display in the project PBF/IRF-468 in CAR. Youth initiated radio programmes featuring peace messaging, and mixed teams of young men and women in the Bamingui-Bangoran region were active in addressing issues of transhumance and farmer–herder conflicts. Implementers were especially impressed that youth who were not direct beneficiaries of the project nonetheless followed these activities and began spreading the peace messages themselves in remote villages – areas beyond Radio Ndélé's reach – further amplifying the project's impact. One project participant saw the project's main contribution as enabling youth in the region to become key advocates and spokespersons for easing farmer–herder tensions. This also demonstrated the ripple effects of positive role modelling, particularly among youth themselves, illustrating that messages that are delivered by young people are often better received by their peers. As the participant explained: "We consulted young people [on the importance of this issue], discussed with them, and they understood us, just as we understood them. There's no better understanding than that between peers."[52]

Ultimately, across these projects, young people demonstrated a deep understanding of their communities' challenges and proved to be resourceful in finding solutions. What they often lacked was the space to showcase their resourcefulness. Projects could be transformative where they not only facilitated positive messaging and dialogue about youth but allowed them to show what they could do.

Economic youth participation and socioeconomic support

The project findings suggest that socioeconomic considerations and components are particularly important for youth programming. As one project implementer in Colombia put it, "You cannot tackle the social and political aspects of youth inclusion without addressing their economic concerns."[53] This reflected a common sentiment among many practitioners interviewed that economic empowerment must go hand-in-hand with social and political inclusion to create meaningful, sustainable engagement. In addition, at a purely practical or programmatic level, socioeconomic activities helped win support for the project, both among young people and other local stakeholders. Many of the projects incorporated livelihood support activities, alongside other youth empowerment or inclusion strategies – including, for example, "cash for work" programmes and other income-generating activities (Sierra Leone PBF/SLE/D-3), career counselling and skills training (Uganda PBF/IRF-303), improving financial literacy and establishing village savings and credit associations (Sierra Leone PBF/SLE/D-3), or facilitating private sector engagement and mentorship with youth (Liberia PBF/LBR/D-15, Sierra Leone PBF/SLE/D-3).[54] These socioeconomic components were not only of interest to youth, but also attracted much greater support from local and national government officials, which enhanced the project's immediate success and sustainability.

Interviews with project beneficiaries and implementers indicate that including socioeconomic components in programming is crucial because limited economic opportunities are often the key barrier to youth engagement in peacebuilding or other forms of civic and political participation. Young people facing economic strains may not have the time or means to participate in other activities. Additionally, in many communities, lack of employment can generate stigma that, especially when compounded with stigmas about age, can present a substantial barrier to youth credibility. Given this, going some way towards addressing socioeconomic needs may help empower young people to participate. For example, in Liberia (PBF/LBR/D-15), at-risk youth, primarily ex-combatants who were still involved in violent behaviour, were targeted. Many participants struggled with drug addiction, homelessness and unemployment, which proved to be a substantial bar to participating in the project. "When we invited them to the activities, they did not come," one implementing partner reflected.[55] To address this, the project team adapted by providing beneficiaries with shelter (facilitated by the Ministry of Health), access to rehabilitation services and vocational training to develop practical skills.[56] In this way,

the project illustrated that addressing socioeconomic needs can be a prerequisite for youth engagement, particularly marginalized youth.

"An empty stomach has no ears." — youth representative from CAR, on the importance of socioeconomic support

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Such components and approaches are also important because some of the most critical arenas for young people to be involved in community decision-making and peacebuilding relate to livelihoods and other community socioeconomic concerns. For example, in Sierra Leone (PBF/SLE/D-3) and Solomon Islands (PBF/IRF-472), alongside other youth empowerment strategies, project activities encouraged youth participation in local land management and equities, an area that was critical for community participation, arguably the most critical. As the examples in the previous subsection illustrate, when young people were empowered to contribute to local development plans or raise community concerns vis-à-vis private sector entities, they were ultimately given the opportunity to address core community concerns and promote local peacebuilding and conflict prevention.

Several of the project experiences and field research interviews in Guinea and CAR also suggest that socioeconomic components within peacebuilding projects can enhance young people's employability and leadership potential. This type of intervention is thus highly valued by young people and is able to deliver catalytic effects, at least on an individual level. For example, in the project PBF/IRF-264 in Guinea, where youth unemployment is high, former youth council members secured jobs as community relations officers at major mining companies, thanks to their experience in community outreach within the project.[57] One former participant reflected, "While project funds may come and go, skills and knowledge are things you can never take away," underscoring the value of these initiatives as career launchpads.[58] A practical recommendation to project teams from young people interviewed in Guinea is certification of youth involvement in PBF programming, which participants view as essential to improving their job market prospects. In CAR, young beneficiaries of PBF-supported programmes shared similar experiences. One young woman, a sociology student with limited practical experience, participated in the project PBF/IRF-334 in CAR, which is part of the larger 2025 Thematic Review sample (but not cohort 1). She became actively involved in youth-centred advocacy in one of the most volatile districts of the

capital city, Bangui, which had faced recurring violence since the civil war began in 2014. The project aimed to engage youth in understanding and promoting the 2019 National Peace Accord by recruiting young people from targeted communities, training them and providing compensation for their outreach efforts. "The project was an incredible springboard for me. Although I studied sociology at university, it was through this project that I conducted my first ever field observations and surveys," she said during a research visit in Bangui in February 2024. This experience later enabled her to secure a position as a community outreach officer with an international humanitarian organization, leveraging her new skills and experience.[59]

"You cannot tackle the social and political aspects of youth inclusion without addressing their economic concerns." — youth expert from Colombia

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Lastly, conversations with stakeholders highlighted that youth economic inclusion goes beyond simply providing job opportunities; it involves ensuring young people have a stake in the broader economy and national development processes. This idea was highlighted in the *Missing Peace* study,[60] yet six years later, the gap between socioeconomic programming and national development initiatives remains evident as many programmes are not always in sync with broader development goals. Young people frequently highlight the disconnect between vocational training programmes and the actual demands of local labour markets, which remains a significant barrier to their economic inclusion. As a senior UN official in Guinea noted, "We keep training young people for stereotypical jobs. We continue to train hairdressers and tailors in a country where these fields are already oversaturated."[61] He further acknowledged the need to manage expectations as they relate to socioeconomic programming at the local level and the ability of PBF funding to make a significant impact on the employment market. "This is a systemic issue that goes far beyond the PBF's funding capabilities," he said. "The PBF alone cannot sustainably address the structural economic challenges in countries facing severe unemployment."[62] While this cohort did not provide a large enough evidence base to fully explore the linkages between peacebuilding programming and larger economic development initiatives, the observations of both the programme officers and young people interviewed suggested that this is an issue that merits greater

exploration, perhaps as part of disucssions on the humanitarian, development and peace nexus.

Sustainability and local ownership of programmes

A concern cited across many of the projects was the risk that they would be difficult to sustain. This is a frequent concern with PBF-supported projects given that they are designed to be short term, and many last only one or two years. The average duration for all 41 projects in the broader Review sample was just over 24 months. Having programming that only endures for a short period of time can be a particular challenge for peacebuilding that seeks to address structural or systemic factors like those connected to lack of youth participation. For instance, stigmas against youth may only change slowly. Addressing socioeconomic barriers, which often relate to much larger issues of poverty, a poor economic or governance situation or other factors, are well beyond the scope of a single project. However, although there is no perfect way to test this, some of the project evidence suggested some ways to mitigate sustainability challenges in youth programming.

One of the key findings highlighted above was that projects tend to find more success within the course of implementation when they build on existing mechanisms or initiatives – whether these are indigenous to a local community, or were inherited from previous peacebuilding programming. This can also contribute to sustainability – building on established mechanisms or structures can limit the risk that newly introduced mechanisms collapse after project closure. Building on community initiatives that have already won some acceptance can also ensure that projects are "locally endorsed", which in turn increases the likelihood that interventions are both relevant and sustainable. By working with established structures or practices, projects can avoid the pitfall of introducing external solutions that may be perceived as foreign or disconnected from communities. For example, implementing partners working with the project in DRC (PBF/IRF-262) were relatively optimistic that the local peace committees or *barazas* would continue beyond the project's lifespan if they were strengthened, as communities were already familiar with the initiative and had embraced it. The two other projects described above as building on existing initiatives, in El Salvador (PBF/IRF-414) and CAR (PBF/IRF-468), may also have a greater chance of achieving sustainability because they were working through mechanisms that had already gained traction and local support.

Investment and support from local stakeholders is paramount for sustainable youth programming. Where a

project was able to gain the trust of key community interlocuters or local officials – and where these local counterparts saw value in the initiatives – there was greater success within the course of the project, and greater optimism about its results or activities being sustained after project closure. To have meaningful youth participation requires that youth be accepted as counterparts in local dialogues and decision-making. The other stakeholders need to recognize the importance of youth involvement as much as the youth themselves do. In the project PBF/IRF-263 in Chad, for example, involving local authorities, including religious leaders from Catholic, Protestant and Islamic councils, was described as key to the project's success. "What was particularly interesting and successful about this project," the implementing partners noted, "is that it highlighted the crucial role and competencies of young people in conflict resolution and prevention, albeit somewhat indirectly – by targeting and empowering those who lead them, namely traditional authorities."[63] According to the implementing partners, the prospects for continuing youth coordination and participation following the adoption of the intergenerational charter were strong due to clear support from local political actors, including government officials, traditional leaders and influential community members.

There were also sometimes tangible commitments for continuing programming as a result of strong partnerships with national and local government actors, as well as other community stakeholders. In Liberia (PBF/LBR/D-15), the project team successfully engaged the Ministry of Youth and Sports early in the process, ensuring consistent institutional support and involvement throughout the project activities. Upon conclusion of the project, the Ministry offered many of the youth beneficiaries – many of whom were marginalized and previously unemployed – roles as volunteers or paid employees, allowing for their continued engagement with political stakeholders and a sustainable entry into the formal work sector.[64]

In contrast, some projects that struggled with sustainability reported that their challenges were partly due to the absence of early integration of sustainability strategies, particularly regarding the involvement of local stakeholders. For example, the implementers of the project in Colombia (PBF/IRF-455) acknowledged that they had not sufficiently engaged stakeholders early on, nor did they address key issues such as economic difficulties and social inequalities until too late in the project cycle. One noted: "We should have dedicated more time to outreach with local institutional actors. We organized job fairs with the public and private sectors towards the end, but it was probably too late. Unfortunately, I now doubt the project's sustainability."[65] In

such cases, once external support ends, youth may not be able to sustain project gains. Socioeconomic vulnerability may re-emerge, or the youth involved may lose the traction and access they had to local decision-making processes and other key community stakeholders.

A final key finding is that project success and sustainability, where present, is not absolute. Changes in the national or local context can have a dramatic effect on a project's sustainability. The 2018-approved project in Tunisia (PBF/IRF-288) has been referenced several times for its innovative features and marked successes in integrating youth into municipal decision-making discussions and helping change the discourse around youth engagement. However, after the closure of the project at the very end of 2020, political dynamics in Tunisia shifted. In March 2023, the Tunisian President suspended the municipal councils, which the project had worked to link with youth on questions of local governance. Some of the local stakeholders who had made commitments to continuing the effects of the project – the surest signs of sustainability – were among those whose positions were suspended. Thus, despite tremendous success in the course of the project, implementing partners later felt that "earlier progress was erased".[66]

Similarly, while the project PBF/IRF-264 in Guinea had significant success in 18 of the 20 targeted communes, 2 of the 20 targeted communities were deemed "impenetrable" due to extreme tensions, with resistance from both youth factions and local stakeholders.[67] This example illustrates that even proactive efforts and well-designed models will not always succeed. For that reason, some interviewees stressed that it was important to invest in a broad-based sustainability strategy, seeking support and avenues for continuing programming across a range of stakeholders, including the private sector. Interviews with stakeholders in Latin America, for instance, highlighted the value of a "networking strategy that prioritizes partnerships with universities", among others, as these can provide young people with the skills and knowledge needed to achieve their long-term goals regardless of changes in public policies or other contextual dynamics.[68]

Conclusion and recommendations

The projects within this pillar underscore the potential of engaging young people in peacebuilding at the local level, illustrating their contributions to both peace processes and broader social cohesion. By contrast with more formal, national-level processes (e.g. empowering youth through national councils, or national policy deliberations),[69] engaging youth at the local level appears to be a more direct

and tangible avenue. Local governance structures often serve as the initial reference point for young people's experiences with decision-making or administrative institutions, shaping their understanding of political mechanisms and their ability to engage, whether positively or negatively. Young people are also particularly eager to participate locally due to their familiarity with community dynamics and the immediate relevance of local issues to their daily lives.[70] As one young person observed during a focus group discussion in CAR, "Things are often simpler at the local level because it's closer to our everyday concerns … I think that it's in our villages and communities where we can really make an impact."[71] In that sense, local issues make an ideal starting point for civic engagement, allowing young people to be particularly active, resourceful and innovative, in ways that can be more challenging at higher levels of governance (i.e. in national institutions). Additionally, involvement in local issues helps young people build networks, acquire political and leadership skills, and build credibility, which are critical for broader political participation at national and international levels.[72]

Despite the significant value of local-level projects, the findings from these projects reflect a persistent reality: young people are often still excluded from key decision-making spaces and face numerous barriers to increased participation. Socioeconomic barriers, including lack of both financial means and economic leverage within a community, can prevent young people's participation in peacebuilding. Deep-rooted intergenerational differences and rigid social hierarchies can be a further barrier to young people's participation. Negative societal attitudes and stereotypes about youth – underestimating young people's capacities or associating them with inexperience or instability – mean that young people are frequently denied opportunities to contribute meaningfully, even in matters directly impacting their lives and communities.

Surmounting these barriers is no easy feat. One young former peacebuilder in DRC, reflecting on her early interactions with political stakeholders at the national level, said: "Mindsets are really stubborn; no matter what you do or say, you will always be seen as just a young [girl] in their eyes."[73] Those interviewed tended to emphasize that it required the combination of starting to transform perceptions and local mindsets alongside thinking about other inputs that might contribute to ameliorating conflict and political dynamics. Implementing partners in the project PBF/IRF-263 in Chad, for example, suggested: "Issues faced by the youth [in the intervention area] are primarily sociocultural; many of the barriers are intrinsically sociocultural and political, so our challenge was to influence and change mindsets."[74]

The projects suggested a number of strategies and lessons learned that can enhance the effectiveness of youth programming. First, the findings suggest that socioeconomic empowerment is essential; without addressing the economic barriers that prevent many young people from engaging fully, participation risks being limited to a privileged few. Similarly, overcoming intergenerational mistrust requires long-term trust-building efforts and support for youth-led initiatives that can shift perceptions by enabling young people to showcase what they can do. Projects may be more successful and sustainable where they build on an existing foundation, such as previously established mechanisms or other existing community practices.

Nevertheless, while youth participation in peacebuilding has shown promise, scaling and sustaining these successes will require greater consideration of comprehensive strategies that can link local peacebuilding work to larger national efforts, responding to deeper socioeconomic and structural barriers. Within any given project, short project cycles and shifting political landscapes often undermine continuity. Early integration of sustainability strategies and collaboration with local stakeholders, while also investing in other sources of sustainability – such as improving youth capacity and support for strong grass roots youth networks at the local level – can help address some of these issues, but not entirely solve them.

A number of ways to strengthen youth peacebuilding programming emerged:

- **Invest in platforms, structures or networks of young people,** whether youth councils or representative bodies, youth activism platforms or networks, or social or professional clubs. Such solidarity groups and platforms provided support networks for young people and helped anchor gains in youth participation.
- **Create opportunities for young people to lead and deliver.** Whether involving them in community planning, renovation or other public works, or giving them the chance to lead on conflict resolution or community awareness, allowing young people to "show by doing" proved effective in dismantling stigmas and barriers to further participation.
- **Think about the ways that youth participation mechanisms open up channels of communication and relationship-building with others in the community.** Some of the most powerful effects of the mechanisms created within the youth programming examined were that they allowed for input, communication and feedback loops with youth and among the community, which helped defuse tensions.

- **Account for socioeconomic considerations and components in nearly all youth peacebuilding programming.** Socioeconomic needs and gaps were so central to young people's 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 the degree of catalytic effect and overall impact desired without some attention to these issues in any peacebuilding project. However, it is important to remember that socioeconomic needs encompass much more than livelihood needs, and more thought should be given to syncing project inputs with national and local economies and development plans.

- **Invest in youth capacities, skillsets and knowledge, ranging from knowledge of political and peacebuilding processes to practical skills, such as project-management and fundraising.** Strong individual and collective youth capacities are core to having catalytic and sustainable effects in this field. Where peacebuilding programming provides some form of training or capacity-building, providing an official certificate of participation can further enhance non-financial catalytic effects; in countries where training opportunities are limited, these can be an important part of the job credentialling process.

- **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, building partnerships with local stakeholders, ensuring sufficient trust from the young people involved, and contributing to sustainability.

Endnotes

1 Imane Karimou led the research, analysis and drafting for this cohort study. Additional drafting and analysis were contributed by Erica Gaston, as part of the collaborative writing process syncing the cohort case studies with the larger Thematic Review on youth, peace and security. Team members Emma Bapt and Luisa Kern also contributed insights and supported research.

2 See, e.g. United Nations Security Council resolution 2419 (2018); the Presidential Statement on YPS (S/PRST/2019/15), adopted in December 2019; Security Council resolution 2535 (2020); the Secretary-General's inaugural report on YPS, S/2020/167; UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/76/137 (2021). There are 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 and A/RES/70/262.

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

4 Beyond the projects examined in this cohort study, at the start of the research and to help select those projects, the United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR) research team first conducted a lightning review of the ProDocs of 153 projects related to youth that were approved for PBF funding between 2018 and 2022. The vast majority were focused on the local or community level. For more on the lightning review, see annex 2 in Erica Gaston, Imane Karimou, Luisa Kern and Emma Bapt, *2025 Peacebuilding Fund Thematic Review on Youth, Peace and Security* (New York, United Nations University, 2025). The larger focus on local peacebuilding is also reflected in other studies. Out of the 399 youth-led peacebuilding organizations surveyed for the *Missing Peace* study, the majority operated at the local level. Graeme Simpson and others, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security* (New York, United Nations Population Fund/PBSO, 2018), p. 41.

5 This Review is part of a broader analysis of PBF youth-focused investments over the past five years, focusing on 12 out of the 41 projects included in the larger sample. A total of 48 interviews were conducted for these 12 projects, gathering insights from project implementers across various UN agencies, international organizations, project participants, local CSOs and government actors where relevant within each country context. Additionally, the author conducted field research visits in CAR in February 2024 and Guinea in June 2024. For the full methodology of the overall review, see Erica Gaston and others, *2025 Peacebuilding Fund Thematic Review on Youth, Peace and Security*.

6 Graeme Simpson and others, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security*, p. 54.

7 Ibid., p. 51.

8 Anita Ernstorfer, *Synthesis Review: 2017–2019 Peacebuilding Fund Project and Portfolio Evaluations* (New York, PBF, 2020), p. 23.

9 Graeme Simpson and others, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security*, p. 69.

10 The UN SDG Handbook for Youth, for instance, recognizes youth potential, particularly at the local level, where they are essential partners to localize SDG priorities and monitor their implementation, explaining that "since there is such a wide variety of the Goals and targets, it is necessary for different actors to collaborate with local and national governments to localize and contextualize the Goals and adopt methods of accountability that reflect the unique challenges on ground". Sunyoung Hwang and Jiwon Kim, *UN and SDGs: A Handbook for Youth* (New York, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific East and North-East

Asia Office, 2017). See also Ruth Beckmans and Marte Hellema, *Youth, Peace and Security: Fostering Youth-Inclusive Political Processes* (New York, United Nations Development Programme, 2024), p. 25.

11 *Report of the Secretary-General on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace* (United Nations publication, 2020), p. 39.

12 Graeme Simpson and others, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security*, p. 30.

13 Ibid., pp. 116–125.

14 This challenge is particularly pronounced in Africa, where 71 per cent of the sample projects were implemented, and where education exclusion remains a significant issue. According to UNESCO, in sub-Saharan Africa, over one fifth of children aged 6 to 11 years are out of school, along with one third of youth aged 12 to 14 years and nearly 60 per cent of youth aged 15 to 17 years. These gaps in foundational education persist into adulthood, depriving young adults of the skills and capacities needed to become credible and effective actors in their societies.

15 PBF Thematic Reviews are an annual learning exercise that take stock of a particular set of PBF-supported projects over the previous five years, with a view to contributing to learning for the PBF and its partners, ranging from programming best practices to guidance on future directions. The 2025 Thematic Review focuses on the overall theme of youth in peacebuilding, how the PBF has helped advance the YPS agenda, and in particular on efforts to advance youth participation and engagement in peacebuilding.

16 Due in part to funding limitations but also efforts to explore other modalities for encouraging CSO and youth engagement (including evidence of greater mainstreaming of youth inclusion in other PBF-supported projects), the YPI call for proposals did not take place in 2024. As of the time of writing, there were no immediate plans to reinstate it. Interview with PBSO officer, Microsoft Teams, 6 December 2024 (Interview #180).

17 Evaluation for the project PBF/IRF-414 in El Salvador, pp. 35, 38.

18 This was outlined in the *Missing Peace* study: "Youth described themselves as nearly invisible and inevitably voiceless in the popular media. They complained about seeing youth in the press but never hearing young people's voices or perspectives directly." Graeme Simpson and others, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security*, p. 18.

19 For example, the ProDoc for the project in DRC stated at the time of submission: "For young people, the project will focus on involving them in local peace committees while transforming them into agents of peace promotion and peaceful coexistence between the two communities, giving them the opportunity to improve their image within the wider community." ProDoc for the project in DRC (PBF/IRF-262), p. 7. The theory of change of the project in CAR stated: "IF young women and men, including from indigenous and marginalized groups, have increased capacity and opportunities to lead efforts to prevent and resolve land and environmental conflicts related to transhumance … and IF young people's peacebuilding actions are amplified across generations and across communities, THEN violent conflict in the Bamingui-Bangoran region of CAR will be reduced, and a powerful case will be made for increased youth participation in civic spaces in peace processes at all levels in CAR." ProDoc for the project PBF/IRF-468 in CAR, p. 15.

20 In Sierra Leone, a joint United Nations and government report affirmed that "the context of high unemployment and pervasive poverty across the country constitutes the largest underlying cause for the recruitment of at-risk youth into gangs and cliques…" *Report of the joint assessment mission on youth at risk in Sierra Leone* (United Nations publication, 2019), p. 9. The project's theory of

change explicitly stated: "IF livelihood and socioeconomic opportunities are increased for youth at risk, with improved capacity and resources to engage in resilience farming and agri-based enterprises... THEN the incentives for youth at risk to join gangs and cliques will reduce significantly." ProDoc for the project in Sierra Leone (PBF/SLE/D-3), p. 20. In the project in Liberia (PBF/LBR/D-15), implementing partners highlighted similar economic drivers, stating, "When you look at why youth join cliques and gangs, you find that it's because of money. In a post-conflict situation like in Liberia, this can be dangerous." Interview with implementing partner, Microsoft Teams, 14 June 2024 (Interview #34).

21 ProDoc for the project in Uganda (PBF/IRF-303), p. 11. There are other examples of such theories of change in the sample. The ProDoc for the project in Tunisia states: "If young people have the opportunity to identify and propose initiatives that reflect their needs and serve their communities ... And if young women and young men are encouraged to participate in initiatives that address both their needs and those of their communities ... Then ... young people will emerge from their isolation and contribute to social cohesion and local resilience". ProDoc for the project in Tunisia (PBF/IRF-288), p. 18.

22 This analysis was based on earlier analysis by the UN country team and a follow-on study by UNFPA. The latter also identified that youth were almost completely excluded from political engagement at all levels – in part because of fear and suspicion on the part of many government officials given past altercations involving youth. Interview with implementing partner, Coyah, Guinea, 12 June 2024 (Interview #61).

23 Ibid.

24 Interview with the Mayor, Kolaboui, Guinea, 13 June 2024 (Interview #62).

25 Ibid.

26 Interview with former members of the local youth council, Kamsar, Guinea, 13 June 2024 (Interview #63).

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Interview with implementing partner, Microsoft Teams, 12 June 2024 (Interview #47).

30 Ibid.

31 MONUSCO officially closed its office in Tanganyika Province in June 2022, as per the transition timetable. See: United Nations, "Press release: MONUSCO's withdrawal from Tanganyika: mission accomplished, according to Bintou Keita", 24 June 2022.

32 Joint interview with implementing partners, Microsoft Teams, 2 July 2024 (Interview #33).

33 Ibid.

34 Independent evaluation for the project in DRC (PBF/IRF-262), p. 8.

35 For example, the initiative originally formed local peace committees to bring community members together for dialogue and mediation. However, the *barazas* were still limited in representation of women and youth and were not geographically available across the province. Hence, the project team established new *barazas* in previously uncovered areas and worked to ensure the inclusion of women and young people.

36 In contrast to local peace committees in DRC, those in the Bamingui-Bangoran region of CAR have always been inclusive of youth, but "their voices often struggle to be heard in these community forums," primarily due to "prejudices regarding the involvement of young men and women in violence". Therefore, the challenge of the project PBF/IRF-468 in CAR was not so much the inclusive nature of these local peace committees per se, but rather promoting the actual consideration of the perspectives of young people involved. Evaluation for CAR PBF/IRF-468, pp. 2, 4. Available at https://cnxus.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Rapport-Outcome-harvesting.UNP006.pdf (accessed on 1 April 2025).

37 Interview with UN staff, Microsoft Teams, 12 April 2024 (Interview #40).

38 Interview with implementing partner, Microsoft Teams, 16 May 2024 (Interview #41).

39 Ibid.

40 Evaluation for CAR PBF/IRF-468, pp. 13, 20.

41 Ibid., p.26.

42 "Peace Lover" is available at https://t.co/hzMtOsSR9x (accessed 2 April 2025).

43 Involving local authorities also resulted in practical implementation benefits in Chad PBF/IRF-263. In the Nya Pendé region, for instance, traditional chiefs helped streamline the participant selection process by utilizing radio broadcasts and town hall meetings to identify and assess eligible and interested participants, and ultimately communicate the final list of selected individuals. Implementers explained that this helped minimize potential tensions around who got to participate in the project and who did not, and facilitated a smooth and transparent selection process. Joint interview with implementing partners, Microsoft Teams, 3 April 2024 (Interview #31).

44 These "youth coordination" ("*coordination des jeunes*") organizations managed multifunctional centres equipped with computers and sewing materials provided by the project. They also appointed peace ambassadors to act as sentinels who could help identify and prevent conflicts early. Joint interview with implementing partners, Microsoft Teams, 3 April 2024 (Interview #31).

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Interview with implementing partner, Microsoft Teams, 14 June 2024 (Interview #34).

50 Interview with implementing partner, Microsoft Teams, 11 June 2024 (Interview #39).

51 Joint interview with implementing partners, Microsoft Teams, 2 July 2024 (Interview #33).

52 Evaluation for the project PBF/IRF-468 in CAR, p. 11.

53 Interview with implementing partner, Microsoft Teams, 20 May 2024 (Interview #46).

54 Through skill-building and training in Uganda, the PBF/IRF-303 project worked to guide youth towards employment opportunities in fields like hairdressing, tailoring and mechanics. In Liberia, the PBF/LBR/D-15 project team partnered with private sector actors to help youth identify viable livelihoods and provided personalized career counselling, which proved to be highly effective. In Sierra Leone, young people were connected with industry leaders through mentorships in fields like poultry farming, enabling participants to secure jobs or apprenticeships in the PBF/SLE/D-3 project.

55 Interview with PBF Liberia, Microsoft Teams, 20 May 2024 (Interview #34).

56 Another implementing partner observed that addressing these critical needs, in particular rehabilitation, was necessary to put the young people involved in "the right frame of mind" to engage: "If you do not have that rehab phase, they are not ready to participate in the project," they said. Interview with PBF Liberia, Microsoft Teams, 20 May 2024 (Interview #34).

57 Interview with former members of the local youth council of Kamsar, Kamsar, Guinea, 13 June 2024 (Interview #63).

58 Ibid.

59 Interview with project participant, Bangui, CAR, 12 February 2024 (Interview #121).

60 Graeme Simpson and others, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security*, p. 76.

61 Interview with senior UN official in Guinea, Conakry, Guinea, 11 June 2024 (Interview #27).

62 Ibid.

63   Joint interview with implementing partners, Microsoft Teams, 3 April 2024 (Interview #31).

64   Interview with PBF Liberia, Microsoft Teams, 20 May 2024 (Interview #34).

65   Interview with PBF Colombia, Microsoft Teams, 16 April 2024 (Interview #45).

66   Interview with PBF Tunisia, Microsoft Teams, 12 April 2024 (Interview #41).

67   Interview with implementing partner, Coyah, Guinea, 12 June 2024 (Interview #61).

68   Interview with implementing partner, Microsoft Teams, 20 May 2024 (Interview #46).

69   Further discussion of these mechanisms is available in the linked study on cohort 2. See Emma Bapt, "Youth participation in national and regional peacebuilding, decision-making and conflict prevention", UNU-CPR Research Brief (New York, Unted Nations University, 2025).

70   Graeme Simpson and others, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security*, p. 51.

71   Focus group discussion with youth, Bangui, CAR, 10 February 2024 (Interview #179). The young people whose statements are reported did not participate in a PBF-supported programme at the time of the discussion or beforehand.

72   Another of the cohorts within this Thematic Review research focuses on youth engagement at national or regional levels. A key finding of the study of that cohort is that local-level involvement and engagement is the foundation for fostering participation in higher levels of governance. See Emma Bapt, "Youth participation and engagement in national political processes, peace and transition mechanisms, and Youth, Peace and Security strategies" (New York, United Nations University, 2025).

73   Interview with former coordinator of the National Action Plan on youth, peace and security in DRC, Microsoft Teams, 15 April 2024, (Interview #13).

74   Joint interview with implementing partners, Microsoft Teams, 3 April 2024 (Interview #31).