

Investing in Youth, Peace and Security

A review of lessons learned from the Youth Solidarity Fund and Youth Promotion Initiative.

Background paper on financing
the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda



UNAOC and the DPPA/PBSO wrote this paper as a contribution to the upcoming Secretary-General report on Youth, Peace and Security, and the UNGA 76 High-Level Meeting on Financing for Peacebuilding.

Key Messages

1. Noting the rapidly growing demand for youth engagement in peacebuilding, responding to which will require more sustainable and predictable investments to scale up support to youth across the world and leverage the impact of the investments in youth-inclusive peacebuilding.
2. Whenever needed, support packages must include capacity building and mentorship assistance to complement financial investments.
3. Enhanced multi-stakeholder coordination and partnerships at local, regional and global levels can maximize impact by providing multilayered support to young peacebuilders.

Introduction

Today's world is dealing with the largest youth demographic cohort, encompassing some 1.8 billion young people. The vast majority live in developing countries, where they constitute a significant proportion of the population.¹ Investing in the agency and the capacity of young people is paramount to achieving sustainable peace and prosperity worldwide. It is crucial to recognize youth as a source of mobilization of fellow youth and as autonomous actors and critical partners² as they are indispensable for social change, economic growth, peace and stability, mediation processes, development and technological innovation.

Although young people have been transforming their communities for decades, the adoption of the Security Council resolution 2250 in 2015 helped spotlight their positive role and contributions to preventing and resolving conflict and building sustainable peace.

The Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) Agenda represents a fundamental shift in the narrative that used to consider young people as idle victims of violence or as a threat to peace and stability.³ Instead, the YPS agenda recognizes youth as an asset, valuing young people's unique contribution to create more inclusive, peaceful and prosperous societies. The first report of the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General to the Security Council on the implementation of the YPS Agenda (2020), as well as Security Council resolutions 2419 (2018) and 2535 (2020), further reiterated the vital role of young people and youth-led organizations in efforts to build and sustain peace.

Young people are not indifferent to the challenges that threaten peace and stability in their communities. Increasingly, they design their own projects, use online media to challenge the status quo and work hard to claim their spaces at the decision-making tables. However, young people's full potential remains an untapped resource due to the lack of appropriate financial and technical support required to increase their impact.

Financing peacebuilding worldwide remains a critical challenge, even more, when it comes to financing the efforts of young peacebuilders. Most youth-led organizations operate with an annual budget of under \$5,000,⁴ severely hindering their ability to deliver sustainable and more impactful projects.

Whenever intentions to fund youth-led initiatives exist, strict and overly bureaucratic application procedures and requirements often impose barriers for youth-led organizations to access the support they need. The current funding culture is advantageous to bigger, more structured organizations that can adapt to donor requirements that are often unattainable for most youth-led organizations.

Young people's access to resources, financial or otherwise, has historically been limited, but the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed further challenges, adding extra pressure on the existing structures.

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1. Youth 2030 - United Nations Youth Strategy (2018). Available at: https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/18-00080_UN-Youth-Strategy_Web.pdf
 2. United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) Action Plan (2019-2023).
 3. Simpson, G. (2018) "The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security". United Nations. Available at: <https://www.youth4peace.info/ProgressStudy>
 4. Simpson, G. (2018) "The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security". United Nations. Available at: <https://www.youth4peace.info/ProgressStudy>

The United Nations Alliance of Civilization (UNAOC) established the Youth Solidarity Fund (YSF) in 2008 to support youth-led projects promoting social cohesion and tackling polarization. Later in 2016, responding to Security Council resolution 2250 (2015), the Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) established the Youth Promotion Initiative (YPI). To date, both funds are among the few funding windows in the UN system dedicated to the implementation of the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda.

This paper builds on the learning and experience of YSF and YPI through light desk reviews, reflecting on some of the challenges youth-led organizations face when trying to access funding for their peacebuilding initiatives. The paper also puts forward some concrete recommendations for increasing the support to youth-led organizations through a comprehensive support package that combines capacity building, mentorship services and funding support.

Youth Solidarity Fund (YSF)

The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), established in 2005, works to explore the root causes of polarization within and among societies. It recommends a programme of action to address polarization, including building bridges of understanding through the promotion of intercultural and interreligious dialogue. As a crucial soft power political tool for preventive diplomacy, UNAOC works to support the UN's conflict prevention and conflict resolution agenda. Youth is one of the core pillars of UNAOC's work. Through its innovative and creative programmes, UNAOC recognizes young people's immense potential to meaningfully contribute to peacebuilding efforts and be powerful agents for social change.⁵

The Youth Solidarity Fund has a long history of supporting youth-led organizations that foster peaceful and inclusive societies. Established in 2008, YSF recognized the importance of creating funding mechanisms to support the grassroots work of youth-led organizations. Since its inception, YSF has funded 73 youth-led projects in over 42 states, representing a total of \$2.49 million in investments. The grants are up to \$25,000 and conditioned to spend 90 per cent or more of the funds on project activities, including M&E. Funded projects are developed and implemented by young people. They impact entire communities and engage with multiple actors, including religious and political leaders, policymakers, educational institutions, media organizations and of course, young people. YSF supports projects that reach out to and connect marginalized youth from different socio-economic, cultural and religious backgrounds. This approach helps foster broader and transformative engagement of all types of youth while reducing polarization in communities.

An example is the "Nurturing for Peace" project, implemented by the Uganda Muslim Youth Development Forum through YSF 8th edition funding cycle. The project brought together young people and religious leaders from seven religious sects in conflict-ridden parts of Eastern Uganda. Through skills training and interfaith dialogues, they created strong social ties among the youth from different faith groups while acquiring skills to identify, reduce and eliminate religiously motivated violent extremist narratives. The project built two peace gardens that became safe spaces for community members to meet and interact with each other.

One of the current YSF recipients, the Architects of Diversity from Malaysia, is proving what young people can achieve with limited resources and uncertain conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. With a budget under \$2,000, they bring together young people from different ethnicities to discuss and build an understanding of identity-based issues and alienating attitudes. The seed funding helps them to start an online conversation and engage fellow youth in community action and advocacy through developing their individual capstone projects.

5. United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) Action Plan (2019-2023).

Youth Promotion Initiative (YPI)

The UN Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) is the UN's financial instrument of first resort to sustain peace in countries or situations at risk or affected by violent conflict. Since its establishment in 2005, the PBF has invested nearly \$1.5 billion to support 62 countries in their efforts to build and sustain peace. The Fund aims to support interventions that are of direct relevance to peacebuilding processes and address critical gaps in areas for which no other funding mechanisms are available. In response to the twin resolutions on the 2015 review of the UN peacebuilding architecture,⁶ the PBF has evolved from a post-conflict instrument to one that invests at all stages of conflict cycles: before, during and after conflict. The PBF may support UN entities, governments, regional organizations, multilateral banks, national multi-donor trust funds or civil society organizations. The Fund works across pillars and supports integrated UN responses to fill critical gaps, respond quickly and with flexibility to peacebuilding opportunities, and catalyze processes and resources in a risk-tolerant fashion.

Recognizing the role of horizontal inequalities and exclusion in driving today's violent conflicts, youth-inclusive and gender-sensitive approaches to peacebuilding are a core priority for the PBF. The Fund invests in initiatives to support new and innovative ways to break down the barriers young people face to engage in political and peacebuilding processes and facilitate their meaningful participation in these processes at all levels.

In 2016, responding to Security Council resolution 2250 (2015), the PBF launched the first Youth Promotion Initiative (YPI) to support young people's critical contributions to peacebuilding. Since its establishment, the PBF has allocated over \$105 million to 83 projects focused on youth, implemented by UN and civil society partners under the YPI, steadily increasing its annual funding from \$2.7 million in 2016 to \$25.7 million in 2021. To date, the YPI remains the largest UN funding initiative in support of the Youth, Peace and Security agenda. The YPI is open to proposals from UN entities, civil society organizations and, since 2020, also to joint UN-CSO proposals. Forty per cent of the funds have been allocated to civil society partners, including youth-led organizations.

Since the PBF funds aim to be catalytic, the YPI annual calls represent an opportunity to focus on specific areas or themes within the peacebuilding sector that are often underfunded. For instance, the Fund currently supports youth inclusion in local decision-making in Burundi, CAR and Sierra Leone. Other examples include the protection of young human rights defenders in Burkina Faso, El Salvador and Madagascar and the promotion of youth participation in peacebuilding processes in Guinea-Bissau, Mali and Sri Lanka.

Our experience so far

Both YSF and YPI provide the UN with a mechanism to financially support youth peacebuilding initiatives around the world. Moreover, they create a platform for the UN and its partners to work closely with young people and learn how to best support them.

To address the ever more complex needs, aspirations and demands of young people, the Funds have evolved and expanded their support models over the years. Early on, YSF recognized the need to **go beyond funding and provide various training courses and workshops** for youth leaders to strengthen their planning and implementation skills, enhance project sustainability and provide them with networking opportunities. In addition, YSF alumni are engaged as strategic partners, helping to shape the Fund, identify emerging priorities and support the selection and development of proposals for the recurrent calls. They stay engaged long after their projects are completed, often through international forums and events where they can share their impact stories and lessons learned with the broader peacebuilding community.

To expand the pool of organizations benefiting through YSF, UNAOC introduced webinars during the application stage and workshops during the selection process stage. In 2021, sixteen shortlisted youth-led organizations had a chance to strengthen their project proposals and presentation skills during the process. This way, even those youth-led organizations that were not selected could still benefit from training and can use their strengthened project proposals to secure funding elsewhere.

6. United Nations General Assembly Resolution 70/262 (A/RES/70/262). 2016. Available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/70/262> and United Nations Security Council Resolution 2282 (S/RES/2282). 2016. Available at: [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2282\(2016\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2282(2016))

The YPI introduced similar efforts. The **PBF incorporated capacity building elements into the application process to improve the quality of the proposals submitted.** Project teams applying for the YPI have benefited from webinars in different languages, which in 2021 were organized by PBF in collaboration with OHCHR, UNFPA, UNICEF and UN Women as well as project clinics and two rounds of feedback on the proposals.

Since 2018, both Funds have been working with the United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY) and Search for Common Ground (SfCG) to **pilot an innovative approach to youth leadership in peacebuilding.** The new methodology, called “Youth360”, supports the capacity and leadership of young people and combines access to financial, human and technical resources for formal and informal youth groups.

YSF incorporated the Youth360 methodology through online workshops and structured mentorship support as part of the programme structure in 2019 and 2021. These elements helped enhance organizational development and personal competencies among YSF recipients, leveraging the impact of YSF seed funding and increasing the sustainability of the supported projects.

The **PBF funded two youth projects implemented by SfCG that are piloting the Youth360 methodology on the ground.** In Sri Lanka, the methodology was used to support young women leaders to be drivers of peace. The project provided them access to a comprehensive set of trainings and tailored mentorship. Young women then designed and implemented solutions to the issues they felt were most critical in their communities. The project provided small grants that put the power to determine resource allocation and define peacebuilding outcomes in their hands. By providing the beneficiaries with a concrete opportunity to put their newfound skills to use, 125 young women built their confidence to affect change in their communities. In Guinea, a similar approach was used to strengthen youth leadership in conflict prevention and facilitate a more enabling environment for youth participation. Twenty-four collaborative youth-led projects were developed to contribute to community peacebuilding. All those selected to receive seed funding also benefited from training, coaching and technical support.

Another example of a project including similar elements comes from Albania where the Fund, through the regular portfolio, supported over 15 youth-led trust-building initiatives implemented with the support of UNDP, UNFPA and the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) in Albania and other RYCO members in the region, engaging over 500 youth from hard-to-reach communities by finding common areas of interest across different ethnicities and backgrounds. In addition, the implementation of 38 small grants brought together over 6,000 young people in 152 intercultural learning and dialogue activities. The participants indicated that these projects enabled them to meet new people and better understand other communities and cultures, realizing how much they have in common and how important youth cooperation was for the region. The end-of-project study found that 15 per cent of interviewed youth had a more positive attitude towards peers from other ethnicities, than 2 years earlier.

Reflections and lessons learned

There is a **real momentum for the implementation of the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda**, with a growing number of initiatives recognizing the critical contributions of young people in preventing and resolving conflicts and building sustainable peace. The number of youth-led initiatives contributing to peacebuilding at local, national, regional and global levels is growing exponentially.

While this momentum needs to be celebrated, it also raises **concerns about the imbalance between demand and supply.** The number of youth initiatives seeking support is growing much faster than the increase in investments. For example, the **number of applications for YSF grew from 110 proposals in 2008 to 1508 proposals in 2020**, an increase of 1,271 per cent, which is a clear indication that the community of young peacebuilders is rapidly growing.

Estimates show that young people constitute the majority of the population in countries affected by conflict,⁷ but less than 12 per cent of the \$876.8 million allocated to peacebuilding across the United Nations funds between 2015 and 2020 directly contributed to youth empowerment and participation.⁸ This mismatch becomes evident when looking at the numbers of applications versus the number of projects funded. On average, the **YSF is able**

7. Simpson, G. (2018) “The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security”. United Nations. Available at: <https://www.youth4peace.info/ProgressStudy>

8. Secretary-General’s Peacebuilding Funding Dashboard (Pilot)

to support about 0.9 per cent of all received project proposals. For the YPI, the available resources have been able to fund on average 9.4 per cent of the applications received. This significant gap is an alarming evidence that investments in YPS are nowhere near the optimal level required to meet the ever-increasing needs.

While young people prove their resilience, resourcefulness and ability to innovate daily, the kind of support offered by the international community is still rather inadequate. It is often limited to one-off monetary contributions without any additional assistance to maximize the impact and sustainability of the projects. The capacity needs of young peacebuilders and youth-led organizations are widely recognized but remain extremely underfunded.

While donors should continue improving accessibility of funding for youth-led organizations, including at the local level, further **support to capacity development is needed** to enable youth organizations to access funding. Inflexible requirements and lengthy forms in foreign languages add an extra layer of complexity to an already challenging process. Online application forms, for instance, may disadvantage youth organizations with limited access to the internet. **High expectations by funders, prohibitive costs and the digital divide often discourage** young people from applying in the first place. One way to address this would be to adapt application processes to make them more accessible and youth-friendly, with multiple submission options and easy-to-follow guidelines. It is crucial to explore new and innovative funding modalities to make peacebuilding financing more accessible to local grassroots initiatives. This includes building on partnerships with established local civil society organizations that may mediate the relationship between donors and youth-led groups, take on reporting and fiduciary responsibilities and facilitate access to finance on the ground.

To meaningfully work with young people and youth-led organizations, it is essential to establish true partnerships that recognize, respect and proactively respond to the specific needs of these groups, creating an enabling environment for honest and positive collaboration. While it is crucial to invest in strengthening and developing their capacities, it is equally important to understand that youth-led organizations have their own institutional culture and ways of working that must be respected and honored. Meaningful partnerships need to be mindful not to disrupt the way youth organizations work, imposing or expecting unattainable standards that are not conducive to their traditional practices while meeting accountability standards, including appropriate financial reporting.

Strategic partnerships with civil society organizations, including youth-led groups and organizations, have been a critical tool to ensure the delivery of peacebuilding programming in hard-to-reach areas. These partnerships are powerful ways to reach and engage the most marginalized groups of young people. Recognizing that, the YPI strongly encourages applicants to partner with local youth-led organizations for the implementation at the country level. The Fund requires that at least 40 per cent of the budget be allocated to local civil society partners, particularly youth-led organizations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further increased the gap between the rising need for peacebuilding in many parts of the world and the amount of investments in peacebuilding. Peacebuilding interventions are expected to deliver more with less. The reduction in peacebuilding investments became particularly evident with the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic severely impacted the global economy, creating a wave of unemployment, forcing millions into poverty and escalating tensions and conflict. Movement restrictions disrupted peace and reconciliation processes and intergroup dialogue efforts. In different parts of the world, COVID-19 restrictions were used as an excuse to limit civic engagement and silence dissent. The economic damage from the pandemic forced donors to redirect investments and prioritize recovery response, which resulted in even less funding available for peacebuilding.

The COVID-19 pandemic also impacted programme delivery for both YSF and PBF recipients. **Over half of PBF-funded UN projects in 2020 had to be adjusted to respond to peacebuilding dimensions of the pandemic.** For example, in Sri Lanka, young leaders promoted healthy settings for building cohesive communities. Young people in South Sudan used radio to counter hate speech and stigmatization and raised awareness about youth's role in combating the virus. In different places, livelihood activities geared towards youth inclusion in the humanitarian supply chain to produce masks, soaps and other urgent supplies. For the YPI 2021, the themes were chosen based on underfunded areas impacted by the pandemic.

Conclusion

Young people's contribution to peacebuilding is undeniable and indeed much needed, yet it is still not met with the desired or deserved support from the donor community.

Larger, more sustainable, flexible and predictable investments are needed to take advantage of peacebuilding opportunities presented by young people and contribute to sustainable peace. It is critical to scale up support to youth peacebuilding and leverage the impact of the investments in youth-led efforts.

The financial reality of most youth-led organizations hinders the impact and potential of these groups. They are often so overburdened with resource mobilization and reporting demands that it negatively impacts their capacity for programme delivery. The fact that they survive on short-term or ad-hoc grants makes them vulnerable to changes in donor behavior. It also limits their ability to plan for more grounded strategic and sustainable change.

Directly financing youth-led efforts remains a challenge for many donors and financing mechanisms. However, the success of the Youth Solidarity Fund and practices, such as the Youth360 methodology, provides examples of concrete models that work. Those can serve as inspirational references that could be adapted, replicated and taken to scale.

It is crucial to **broaden the definition of support to youth peacebuilding**, expanding to a more comprehensive package that **combines financial investments with capacity building and mentorship assistance**. It is also essential to recognize the unique nature of youth-led organizations and explore new ways of collaborating that do not disrupt or jeopardize their way of working. Youth-led organizations often stem from informal groups of passionate youth volunteers using their creativity to utilize limited resources to drive a change.

Innovation will remain limited unless the appetite for risk-taking and trying new approaches increases among the international community. The catalytic and risk-tolerant nature of the PBF required the PBF to develop a robust approach to monitoring and evaluation, which combines traditional M&E practices with independent impact assessments at project and portfolio levels, community-based monitoring, thematic reviews and documentation of lessons learned. This model ensures that all learning generated during the implementation of the projects is captured and used to inform future policies and programmes.

Effective coordination remains a challenge but is critical to leverage limited resources available in the YPS field. With the increase in the number and diversity of actors operating in the YPS space, from the UN, the World Bank Group, national governments, donors, INGOs and even the private sector, enhanced coordination among these actors becomes critical. Coherent coordination mechanisms need to be in place to leverage the scale and impact of peacebuilding interventions. More and better multi-stakeholder partnerships are also required to provide the multilayered support youth-led organizations need.

Although there is a growing number of funding opportunities across the UN system available for youth peacebuilding, YSF and YPI remain relevant and needed. **While the YPI is enabling the work of UN entities and CSOs working to support young people and youth-led organizations, YSF complements these efforts by providing a mechanism for direct support to grassroots youth-led initiatives.**

This paper hopes that by providing an overview of the experiences and lessons learned from YSF and YPI, we can start a constructive conversation about how to mobilize the necessary support to accelerate the implementation of the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda and scale up the support to young peacebuilders.