

# SPECIAL REPORT

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## What Works in Youth Projects? Lessons for the Youth, Peace, and Security Field

By *Rebecca Ebenezer-Abiola and Jeremy Moore*



Aluel Atem, a youth leader from South Sudan, shares her peacebuilding experiences with His Holiness the Dalai Lama on October 25, 2018. (Photo by USIP)

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### Summary

- In 2015, UN Security Council Resolution 2250 outlined a new youth, peace, and security agenda around five action areas: participation, protection, prevention, partnership, and disengagement and reintegration.
- Against the backdrop of this agenda, USIP commissioned a meta-review of youth projects it funded or implemented between 2011 and 2018 to identify factors likely to encourage or hinder project success.
- Project success was found to depend above all on high levels of capacity and expertise of the local implementer, meaningful inclusion of youth participants, and the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders, particularly non-youth community leaders.
- Selection bias, lack of facilitation skills, and insecurity or political instability were identified as the factors most likely to hinder project success.
- To succeed in operationalizing the youth, peace, and security agenda, youth-serving CSOs should create the conditions necessary for youth to design, implement, and monitor their own projects.
- Funders also need to support co-creation and joint decision making, as well as strive to better understand the insecurity and instability of the local contexts in which youth-led projects are implemented.



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YOUTH

## ABOUT THE REPORT

In 2018–19, the United States Institute of Peace commissioned the Agency for Peacebuilding—a nonprofit organization that specializes in designing and conducting research on conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding—to conduct a meta-review of fifty-one USIP youth projects that were funded and implemented between 2011 and 2018. This report summarizes the evaluation and offers recommendations for the broader youth and peacebuilding field along five key action areas.

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Lupai from South Sudan and Kenaime from the Central African Republic have a moment of comradery after a peacebuilding session on October 21, 2018. (Photo by USIP)

## Introduction

Until the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250 in 2015, the international community had no comprehensive framework with which to address the specific needs and opportunities of a key demographic group—young people. Resolution 2250 filled this gap, creating a framework for viewing, addressing, designing, and evaluating peacebuilding activities involving youth.

Definitions of “youth” vary across governments and international institutions. For instance, UNSCR 2250 defines youth as people aged eighteen to twenty-nine, whereas the African Youth Charter—the African Union’s strategy for achieving inclusive and sustainable development—uses a broader definition encompassing those aged fifteen to thirty-five.<sup>1</sup> While age ranges may differ, all societies understand youth as a transitional phase from childhood to adulthood, although indicators of the phases in that transition differ across the globe according to social and cultural factors. From a peacebuilding perspective, a deep knowledge of the local context and culture is essential to understanding how violent conflict disrupts human transitional phases and to developing and implementing peacebuilding projects.

UNSCR 2250, which was unanimously adopted by the members of the Security Council, recognizes the immense threat to development and stability that exists when young people’s voices are stifled and encourages member states to actively consider ways to ensure that the voices of youth will be expressed and heard at local, national, regional, and international levels.



Because of limited resources, youth often implement short-term, one-off activities; if they had larger budgets, they could implement projects with longer-term objectives and higher levels of impact.

The resolution rebuts the narrative that had labelled young people as either victims or perpetrators of violent conflict. If youth have historically been viewed as problems to be solved, UNSCR 2250 puts them at the center of policies on peace and security and regards them as partners in countering violent extremism.

In addition to recognizing the important role that young people play in promoting peace globally and in their communities, UNSCR 2250 provides a global framework that UN member states, as well as peacebuilding organizations such as the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), could adopt in promoting and supporting the peacebuilding efforts of young people across the globe. This new policy framework focuses on five action areas that make up the youth, peace, and security agenda: participation, protection, prevention, partnership, and disengagement and reintegration. Moving from recognition to action, the United Nations adopted a new resolution on youth, peace, and security in July 2020. Resolution 2535 builds on Resolutions 2250 and 2419 (a second resolution on youth, peace, and security adopted in 2018) and reflects a significant rise in youth power and an operationalization of the youth, peace, and security agenda throughout the world.<sup>2</sup> For example, UNSCR 2535 provides for the establishment of a reporting system that underscores the importance of young people on the agenda of the Security Council.

UNSCR 2250 and 2535 both call for increased funding and support for youth-led peacebuilding initiatives. The UN-mandated Progress Study on UNSCR 2250 found that nearly 50 percent of youth-led peacebuilding organizations operate on budgets of less than \$5,000 per year.<sup>3</sup> Because of limited resources, youth often implement short-term, one-off activities; if they had larger budgets, they could implement projects with longer-term objectives and higher levels of impact. The report noted that youth-led organizations are frequently overlooked by funders, which prefer partnering with larger, more established civil society organizations (CSOs), thereby further diminishing youth participation in peacebuilding.

In September 2018, inspired by the United Nations' adoption of the youth, peace, and security strategy, USIP commissioned an evaluation of youth peacebuilding initiatives it had funded and implemented since 2011. The goals were to better understand the effectiveness of initiatives in different conflict contexts, to enhance future programmatic and grant-making efforts within USIP, and to share best practices for the benefit of the broader peacebuilding community. The evaluators—associates of the Agency for Peacebuilding—used a meta-review approach to assess fifty-one youth projects supported or implemented by USIP.<sup>4</sup> This report summarizes and contextualizes that evaluation, outlining the portfolio of USIP youth projects that the evaluators examined (including eleven in-depth case studies), explaining the methodology of the evaluation, and examining the factors that most helped or most hindered project success. The report concludes with recommendations, based on the meta-review, for ways in which youth-focused CSOs and funders can operationalize the key elements of Resolution 2250.

# Portfolio of Projects Evaluated

USIP supports youth projects in a variety of ways. The projects examined by the Agency for Peacebuilding—all of which were implemented after 2011 and completed by the end of 2018—had been supported in one of three separate ways: through USIP grants, as part of the Generation Change Fellows Program, or through partnerships between USIP and local actors.

Since the establishment of its grant program in 1986, USIP has awarded more than 2,300 grants intended to seed and develop the international conflict resolution and peacebuilding field. Those grants have supported a remarkably wide array of peace-

building projects managed by nonprofit organizations, including educational institutions and research institutions, as well as CSOs.

The Generation Change Fellows Program began as a program under the US Department of State's Special Representative to Muslim Communities Office. In 2013, the program was moved to USIP and relaunched as a partnership with the University of Southern California's Center for Religion and Civic Culture. Generation Change partners with young community leaders across the globe to foster collaboration, build resilience, and strengthen capacity in their communities over the course of twenty-four months. The program carefully selects small cohorts of dedicated peacebuilders aged eighteen to thirty-five to tackle some of the world's most difficult challenges, from countering violent extremism to enhancing gender equality.<sup>5</sup>

USIP implements some of the projects it funds in partnership with local actors such as CSOs, networks, and individual peacebuilders. The exact shape and division of labor on these projects varies depending on many factors, including whether USIP already has a presence in the country where a project will take place. USIP has staff in more than a dozen countries across Asia, the Middle East, and Africa that work with local partners on peacebuilding and conflict resolution initiatives. The field offices also play a critical role in supporting and monitoring USIP grant projects and the Generation Change program.

Of the fifty-one USIP projects reviewed by the Agency for Peacebuilding, 73 percent were grant projects and 70 percent were considered “new,” meaning they aligned with USIP's objective to

**FIGURE 1. REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF EVALUATED PROJECTS**

The Agency for Peacebuilding reviewed fifty-one projects, most of which were implemented in South Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia.

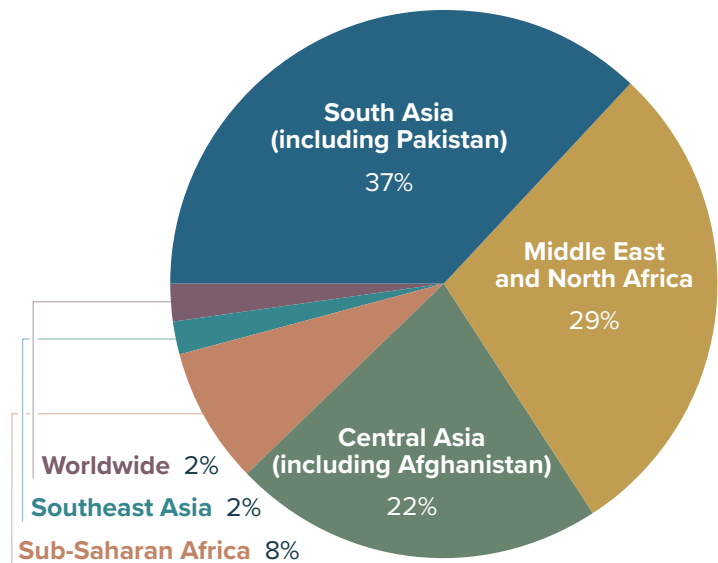


TABLE 1. PROJECTS SELECTED FOR IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

Project	Geographic Area	Purpose
Maktab and Madrassa Project	Afghanistan	Project sought to bridge the divide between students from <i>madrassas</i> (Islamic religious schools) and <i>maktabs</i> (general education schools) by inviting both groups to attend lectures on journalism and then to work together on joint media projects.
Participatory Action Research for Advancing Youth-Led Peacebuilding	Kenya	Project engaged youth through training and research to enable them to become knowledge generators and find their own solutions to social problems related to conflict and governance. <sup>a</sup>
Countering Violent Extremism	Kyrgyzstan	Project aimed to strengthen relationships among key stakeholders (including state authorities and youth) and engender collaboration on the issue of violent extremism.
Peace Culture in a Pluralistic Society	Myanmar	Project sought to train youth peace leaders, expanding their understanding of peacebuilding and supporting them in organizing follow-on activities to raise community awareness about peace and human rights.
Deradicalization and Rehabilitation Program for Children and Adolescents Involved in Militancy	Pakistan	Project provided support to reintegrated youth in their new lifestyles in order to prevent them from reengaging in militancy and other violent activities.
Mashal e Rah Project	Pakistan	Project engaged over one thousand students, seeking to raise their ability to critically engage with online content, become more tolerant, and resist extremist narratives.
National Youth Advocacy Hub	Pakistan	Project sought to counter youth extremism through training and action, a youth-led mass media campaign, and the strengthening of peer-to-peer youth networks.
Sudanese and South Sudanese Youth Leaders Program	South Sudan	Project supported Sudanese and South Sudanese youth leaders in gaining the knowledge, skills, and confidence to play a critical role in building and sustaining peace. <sup>b</sup>
Alliance of Tunisian Facilitators	Tunisia	The project supported adult and youth activists in acquiring greater facilitation skills and playing a more active role in addressing social tensions at national and community levels.
Prevent Radicalization of Young People through a Participative Approach	Tunisia	The project aimed at engaging key youth leaders from the two main national university student unions, enhancing the leaders' facilitation skills so that they would be able to counter violent extremism on university campuses.
Generation Change	Worldwide	This ongoing project aims to provide youth leaders with the skills needed to increase community trust, promote constructive conversations, and design and implement nonviolent initiatives to resolve conflict within their communities.

**Notes:**

- a. This project is described in detail in Sahlim Charles Amambia et al., "Participatory Action Research for Advancing Youth-Led Peacebuilding in Kenya," Peaceworks no. 142, United States Institute of Peace, October 2018, [www.usip.org/publications/2018/10/participatory-action-research-advancing-youth-led-peacebuilding-kenya](http://www.usip.org/publications/2018/10/participatory-action-research-advancing-youth-led-peacebuilding-kenya).
- b. For more information, see United States Institute of Peace, "Sudanese and South Sudanese Youth Leaders Program," [www.usip.org/programs/sudanese-and-south-sudanese-youth-leaders-program](http://www.usip.org/programs/sudanese-and-south-sudanese-youth-leaders-program).

test innovative projects and approaches. Nearly half of the projects involved more than one organization in their implementation. Excluding the twenty-four-month-long Generation Change projects, most projects lasted around twelve months. Budgets varied widely from project to project, but nearly all initiatives had budgets below \$100,000. As figure 1 shows, almost 90 percent of projects were conducted in South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, or Central Asia.

Eleven projects, representing a cross-section of USIP's approaches and priority countries, were chosen for in-depth analysis. They are listed in table 1.

## Methodology: Process and Criteria

The evaluators gathered both qualitative and quantitative data and conducted the review in two phases: first, an extensive document review of the fifty-one youth-related projects; and second, fifty in-depth interviews and ten focus group discussions, most of which focused on the eleven projects selected for in-depth analysis. On the basis of the large amount of data collected during the first phase, five composite theories of change were formulated and used to assess the effectiveness and impact of each project. In the second phase, the evaluators used a “contribution analysis” approach “for assessing causal questions and inferring causality in real-life program evaluations” through an “increased understanding of why the observed results have occurred.”<sup>6</sup> Contribution analyses apply the logic of the project's theory of change to assess the extent to which the project activities contributed to observed outcomes.

The evaluators used four criteria to evaluate USIP's youth portfolio: relevance, effectiveness, impact, and sustainability. The youth projects scored highest on relevance, because nearly every initiative was geared toward the needs of the youth involved and project participants' feedback was overwhelmingly positive regarding the usefulness of the projects. For example, the National Youth Advocacy Hub project implemented in Pakistan guaranteed local relevance by using a youth-led approach in which participants created and enacted their own local peace initiatives. They were continuously supported and linked to other participating youth across the country through the Bargad Volunteer Network, which aims to counter youth extremism through training and action and youth-led social media campaigns. The evaluators attributed the high rate of relevance across the portfolio of projects to a high level of local knowledge among USIP staff and the project implementers, but also noted that this sometimes precluded the need for a more formal needs assessment, which could have deepened understanding of project relevance to youth.

For effectiveness, the evaluators explored the extent to which outcomes were achieved in the short term and medium term. The evaluators found that the participating youth reported increased capacity and confidence, as well as greater awareness and empathy. The evaluators specifically noted how USIP played an integral role in strengthening networks and expanding safe spaces for discourse and interaction on peace and conflict issues. One interviewee who participated in the Mashal e Rah project in Pakistan noted that this was the first time in the history of the interviewee's university that students were allowed to have a dialogue event on campus. The participation of a prominent religious scholar was critical to giving the project legitimacy as a platform to discuss religious extremism and allowed the project to address controversial questions surrounding increasing radicalization at Pakistan's universities.



A group of youth from India, Pakistan, and Myanmar participate in a conflict management exercise during a training in Bangkok on June 24, 2018. (Photo by USIP)

Regarding impact, the evaluators focused on three long-term outcomes: resistance to radicalization, conflict resolution among peers, and conflict resolution at the community level. Overall, however, there was too little evidence to enable any of these outcomes to be evaluated, despite some compelling individual examples such as the deradicalization project in Pakistan. Interviews confirmed that all participants in that project had abandoned radical activities and violence, and many had found jobs or had returned to school. The project used a combination of education and psychosocial support that reverberated beyond the participants themselves and into their families and local communities. Generation Change was more geared toward the three long-term outcomes than most USIP-supported youth projects; the evaluators also noted that Generation Change fellows became trainers to their peers and partners in the implementation of additional projects.

When the evaluators examined sustainability outcomes, including increased capacity and greater empathy, they found evidence that, after a project ended, participating youth continued to apply new skills and knowledge developed through USIP programming. Additionally, they found evidence that the more open attitudes and greater awareness that youth developed remained with them over time. Again, Generation Change is a positive example of



building sustainability through an evolving community of active youth peacebuilders. Once the program's fellows participate in a training, they are automatically part of a global community that continually offers advanced training opportunities and grant support so that Generation Change fellows can implement projects on their own.<sup>7</sup> Interviews confirmed the sustainability of the Generation Change model, with every respondent saying that he or she is still involved in peacebuilding activities.

The Alliance of Tunisian Facilitators is an unambiguous example of sustainability, having been in operation since 2011. Starting as a relatively loose network of individual members who convened for trainings, the alliance has evolved to provide internal information sharing and community dialogues. Some participants in those dialogues have subsequently become members of the alliance, reinforcing the sustainability of the network.

## Five Peacebuilding Approaches

The evaluators identified five distinct approaches taken—sometimes individually, sometimes in various combinations—by USIP youth projects: educational, peer-to-peer empowerment, partnership, participation, and disengagement and reintegration:

**Educational:** This approach is used to transfer skills or knowledge to enhance the awareness and inform the attitudes of youth. Frequently taking the form of peace education or training in school or informal settings, it aligns with the prevention action area in UNSCR 2250. While often deployed to increase the resiliency of youth to the threat of violence or extremism, the educational approach typically involves little interaction between the instructor and participants.

**Peer-to-peer empowerment:** Aligning with the participation and prevention action areas in UNSCR 2250, this approach taps into youth networks and communities with the vision that all youth can be peacebuilders. It is a highly participatory approach that typically starts with small groups or actions and can grow larger as more youth become involved.

**Partnership:** This approach engages youth groups and organizations as co-implementers. It squarely puts youth in a leadership role and encourages active youth participation. It aligns with the participation and partnership action areas in UNSCR 2250.

**Participation:** This approach focuses on bringing youth leaders into decision-making processes or spaces. It aligns with the participation action area in UNSCR 2250, although the top-heavy nature of some decision-making spaces can make this an approach limited to elite youth leaders and not a widespread grassroots effort.

**Disengagement and reintegration:** This approach is applied when working directly with radicalized youth to reintegrate them back into society. Although similar to the educational approach, it falls under the reintegration action area of UNSCR 2250. This approach can be effective but relies on cooperation between implementing organizations and state security services.

All eleven key projects had elements of the educational approach in the form of trainings and information sessions as part of a preparatory phase of the project, if not as the main intended activity. While seven projects had elements of the peer-to-peer and participation approaches,



Young people from Tunisia and Somalia illustrate the importance of relationships during a training session on October 20, 2018. (Photo by USIP)

these were rarely the main activity of the project, and the evaluators noted that this made USIP's youth portfolio somewhat out of step with UNSCR 2250. Indeed, only 6 percent of the reviewed projects featured a direct link to a formal peace or other decision-making process, underscoring the difficulty in mainstreaming youth into these elite-driven processes. The disengagement and reintegration approach was used in just one project, in Pakistan, where the military has been supportive of reintegration approaches by partner NGOs.

The evaluators matched the five peacebuilding approaches (or “change pathways”) with theories of change. CDA Collaborative, a peacebuilding advisory organization, defines a theory of change as a statement that “explains why we think certain actions will produce desired change in a given context,” typically expressed as if-then statements. Theories of change are critical to understanding what assumptions are implicit in the project design and what can be added or removed from a project to make it more effective.<sup>8</sup> In practice, all theories of change should be customized to fit the exact project location and objectives. Two examples from the evaluation reflect the kinds of theories of change adopted by USIP projects:

- **Peace Culture in a Pluralistic Society (Myanmar):** *If* we increase the awareness of grassroots communities by providing diverse and appropriate forms of peace education through our strong youth network, **then** the wider public will engage in peacebuilding initiatives, conflict prevention, and social reconciliation.
- **Countering Violent Extremism (Kyrgyzstan):** *If* key stakeholders—including state authorities, religious leaders, and community groups comprising marginalized youth and women—work collaboratively to develop strategies to address the root causes of extremism, recommend policy changes, and implement joint programming, **then** all stakeholders will be more effectively equipped to counter extremist ideologies, and community cohesion and resiliencies will be strengthened.

In addition to differing in terms of their peacebuilding approaches and theories of change, the projects varied in terms of how they engaged with youth. Some treated youth as beneficiaries, some as partners, and some as leaders. The beneficiary approach is typically an initial phase to dispense information and training and can be a step toward engaging with youth on a deeper level. Projects that treat youth as partners are more collaborative efforts where youth share responsibility with other project staff or partner organizations for the selection of participants and the choice of a project’s content and activities. Projects in which youth are seen as leaders are typically focused on more experienced young peacebuilders who are able to design and guide their own initiatives relatively autonomously, possibly from within their own youth-led organizations. Although many USIP-supported projects tend to have a blended approach, the grant-funded projects are more likely to use the beneficiary and partner approaches, whereas the Generation Change program aims to build youth into independent leaders and prepares them to start their own youth-led organizations.

## What Promotes and What Hinders Success?

An in-depth analysis of the five peacebuilding approaches suggests that each of them has its pros and cons. However, projects that adopt a blended approach—that is, that mix different approaches in their design and implementation—seem to yield better and more sustained outcomes. The Participatory Action Research for Advancing Youth-Led Peacebuilding project in Kenya, for example, integrated several approaches concurrently: it used the educational and partnership approaches, with participants (who are Generation Change fellows) being trained and supported to lead participatory action research; it adopted a peer-to-peer empowerment approach, because those fellows in turn trained other young people to be researchers and facilitators of community conversations; and it used a participation approach, promoting, in various locations, the organization of facilitated community conversations.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond the efficacy of a blended approach, the evaluators identified three important factors that enhance the prospects that a youth project will achieve its goals.

The first, and perhaps the most important, factor is *the expertise and capacity of the implementer*. The implementing organization must have project management skills, a deep knowledge of the local context, and an extensive network in order to identify local needs as well as develop strategies to address them. The Bargad Volunteer Network, for instance, already connected a large and diverse group of youth who were ready to devise new, locally relevant peacebuilding strategies and activities. It also possessed the capacity to manage youth-led working groups and delegate tasks that built the capacity and independence of the volunteers.

The second success factor is the *meaningful inclusion of a diverse group of youth participants*, in terms of bringing together youth from diverse backgrounds and giving them the opportunity to voice their needs, interests, and concerns. The Peace Culture in Pluralistic Society project in Myanmar is a positive example of meaningful inclusion in a highly diverse setting. The grantee specifically built a gender, race, and religion (GRR) criteria into its project design. The grantee reached its participation goal of 40 percent for females, and nearly all the major ethnic and religious groups participated (had more attention been given to trust building during the initial project outreach activities, even more groups might have participated).

To ensure meaningful inclusion, youth must not be viewed as a homogeneous group. Instead, they must be engaged as an heterogeneous group that includes people of different ages, socio-economic backgrounds, and genders; as such, they will have different needs and may require different approaches to ensure their inclusion in youth projects. For example, including young women might require extra effort to build trust with families by showing them that activities will be held in safe spaces. Being inclusive also often means considering the economic exclusion of the target groups and therefore, for instance, providing participants with a small stipend or reimbursing their transportation costs. This consideration should be an integral component of program design.

The third factor conducive to success is the *inclusion of all relevant stakeholders, youth and non-youth*, in line with an initiative's specific objectives. When this happened, projects strongly benefited from the trust-building relationships. For example, in the Countering Violent Extremism project in Kyrgyzstan, the national-level consultative group, which was created by the grantee and included decision makers from security forces as well as youth representatives, was effective in reframing the relations that existed between the two groups, leaving participating youth feeling empowered without threatening non-youth stakeholders. The most prominent independent activity was spurred by the grantee bringing together previously siloed groups: the imams, the Kyrgyz Ministry of Interior's 10th Department (tasked with countering violent extremism), and the district police. Based on the project training and activities, the three groups partnered to conduct a joint initiative to educate school children on the recruitment tactics of terrorist organizations, specifically Islamic State, which was recruiting local youth to go to Syria. A similar initiative was independently created in southern Kyrgyzstan between religious women and the 10th Department, which held joint conferences at schools aimed at countering violent extremism and radicalism among youth.

While this trio of factors can spur success, the evaluators also identified three factors that can hinder progress.





Munira Hamisi, a youth researcher from Kenya, leads a participatory action research session on March 2, 2017, at August 7th Memorial Park in Nairobi. (Photo by USIP)

One factor that can have a significant negative impact is *selection bias*. A reliance on third parties to select participants for a youth program, while it might be beneficial in terms of tapping into existing networks, can exclude potential participants who are not part of the third party's network. Some projects reported that they mostly targeted youth who already had strong convictions about the importance of peacebuilding, creating a “preaching to the converted” effect that excludes youth who may not have been exposed to peacebuilding training and dialogues before. Selecting young people who are already active in the peacebuilding space and belong to known networks may be convenient, but it greatly undermines the relevance of the project to the intended outcome and reinforces blind spots that limit inclusion. To avoid problems created by selection bias, project participants should be selected in the most inclusive and transparent way possible.

A second hindering factor is the *lack of facilitation skills*. Projects that involve a diverse group of participants coming from a variety of backgrounds require excellent facilitation skills. If not properly managed and facilitated, interactions between diverse groups can surface suspicion, mistrust, and competitiveness, which can make participants wary of exchanging views and experiences. Lack of cultural awareness and effective facilitation and mediation can result in misperception and misunderstanding among groups, which can have lasting negative

impacts. Additionally, the evaluators found that some projects with inexperienced facilitators tended to avoid diving deep into contentious issues between groups and opted to pursue more superficial agreement.

*Insecurity and political instability* make up the third hindering factor. Evaluators found that more than one-third of the reviewed projects mentioned (in their project reports) the existence of a challenging security situation, generally caused by political instability and violent extremism. Insecurity often prompted changes in the implementation of planned activities; in a few cases, it made implementation entirely impossible. For example, a project in Pakistan reported that several parents asked the project implementers to avoid organizing activities in schools due to the risk of attacks.

## Recommendations

Since the adoption of the UNSCR 2250 in 2015, many organizations and stakeholders in the youth, peace, and security field have been trying to operationalize the key elements of the resolution. Several findings from the meta-review seem pertinent, directly or indirectly, to this effort. Members of USIP’s Youth Advisory Council—a group of fourteen youth thought leaders and peacebuilding experts who live and work in conflict-affected communities and provide youth-focused input to USIP programs—carefully mined the meta-review as they devised additional recommendations for steps to take toward operationalizing the tenets of UNSCR 2250.<sup>10</sup> The recommendations are divided into two categories: those for youth-serving CSOs, and those for funders.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YOUTH-SERVING CSOs

Based on the review of youth projects, recommendations for civil society are centered around engagement, support, and continued development of the field.

**Aim to engage youth at higher levels of participation.** Sociologist Roger Hart, in his 1997 book *Children’s Participation*, identified eight degrees to which young people can be engaged, each a rung on what is now known as “Hart’s ladder of participation”—from the “decorative” or “token” involvement of young people up through young people actively sharing in decision-making processes with adults.<sup>11</sup> While many organizations and initiatives already work on participation, one of the five pillars of UNSCR 2250, as both a key principle and outcome, the peacebuilding approaches most often employed to ensure participation (the educational and peer-to-peer empowerment approaches) are the ones that fall lower on Hart’s participation ladder. To achieve better and more sustainable outcomes, practitioners who design, implement, and monitor youth programs should aim for the highest rung of the ladder, which rightly places young people in the position to co-lead and co-decide. Greater emphasis needs to be put on meaningful inclusion. Inclusion should go beyond checking a box to satisfy the desire to “decorate” a project with young people (the second rung on Hart’s ladder); efforts should be made to ensure that young people are engaged as partners. This also means that practitioners should have a strategy in place to ensure that diverse youth voices are represented, taking note of the heterogeneity of youth and their varying needs. The strategy must incorporate measures to

include voices of marginalized and minority groups (such as girls and economically disadvantaged youth), going beyond mere representation, while analyzing specific challenges to participation that these groups may face and devising measures to address them.

**Focus on learning.** As practitioners engage youth from different contexts, it is important that experiences and knowledge generated are shared with others through an effective knowledge management and reporting system. From the project design phase, guidelines for reporting should be clearly defined and communicated to ensure that data generated is useful in better understanding youth engagement. All data gathered should also be disaggregated to help project managers learn how much inclusion is being achieved in their youth programming.

**Focus on a blended approach.** Each of the five peacebuilding approaches highlighted in this report (educational, peer-to-peer empowerment, partnership, participation, and disengagement and reintegration) can be valuable by itself, but, as noted earlier, they are most effective when used in combination. Practitioners should choose the most appropriate combination depending on a project's goals and context.

**Define a theory of change.** Theories of change are fundamental for any successful social change initiative, including one focused on youth and peacebuilding. Theories of change describe not only the expected outcomes resulting from an intervention, but also the causal relationship between actions and outcomes, from the short term to the long term. Developing a theory of change should therefore be the starting point for anyone involved in either designing an initiative or assessing one.

**Increase support for youth-driven organizations.** In many cases, young people are engaged primarily as individuals with less attention being given to the organizations or initiatives that they run. UNSCR 2250 stresses the need to engage not only individuals but also youth-led organizations, groups, and movements. Practitioners who design or support youth engagement projects should include, in logical frameworks or performance-monitoring plans, specific outcomes, targets, and indicators related to strengthening the organizational capacities of partners or target groups.

**Conduct more formal conflict analysis and needs assessments.** The meta-review shows that youth-serving organizations and practitioners in the youth, peace, and security space have a deep knowledge and understanding of the context in which they operate as well as the communities they serve. However, they tend to rely heavily on this existing knowledge to identify key target groups and their needs, which could lead to blind spots—for example, favoring educated over uneducated youth as participants. The evaluators found that only 18 percent of all projects reviewed were preceded by a formal or explicit conflict analysis. Only 25 percent had conducted a formal needs assessment. Given these findings, it is clear that youth-serving organizations should devote more effort to ensuring that formal needs assessments and conflict analyses are undertaken regularly, especially where recent information relating to a specific context or target group is not readily available. This is of particular importance for projects that feature increased capacity as a key outcome. It is also important to ensure that the tools used to conduct the assessments are regularly reviewed to ensure their continuing relevance and effectiveness.





Sulaiman, an Afghan youth, makes a contribution during a peacebuilding training in Dharamsala, India, on October 20, 2018. (Photo by USIP)

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS

Based on the review of youth projects, recommendations for funders are centered around cooperation, support, and flexibility.

**Partner with youth-led organizations.** Although there are many small grant opportunities for young people, few of these funding programs have intergenerational cooperation and partnership at their core. Hart's ladder of participation places this form of partnership at the highest rung of the ladder and it has been shown to have many benefits, including creating the space for adults and young people to learn from one another and, by understanding the needs and issues of different generations, to develop effective and relevant solutions.<sup>12</sup> Funders for youth-led or youth-driven organizations should include a framework for cross-learning, experience sharing, and meaningful partnership between adults and young people. Some important practical tips should be considered when carrying out intergenerational work to ensure that it is productive and relevant for all involved. These include setting out clear expectations, encouraging differences and creativity, finding common issues of concern across generations, providing mentorship and support, and communicating openly and respectfully.



**Adopt inclusive decision-making and programming approaches.** There needs to be a more inclusive and transparent method for filling the traditional gap that exists between funders and grantees. Grantees often feel the pressure to tailor their project ideas to satisfy funder interests, but this risks neglecting issues that are not high on the funder’s agenda but are important for the grantees. Greater attention should be given by funders to learning from those on the ground and to mapping strategies jointly with young people who know firsthand what issues most affect their lives. This inclusive and meaningful decision-making approach is more likely to generate sustainable outcomes.

**Provide core funding.** Funding programs for youth-led organizations should include allocations for those organizations’ internal capacity. Providing only the funds needed to implement a project without helping to support the organization’s running costs (in terms of overhead and personnel) can threaten its survival.

**Be flexible to meet changing needs.** The youth, peace, and security space is dynamic and unpredictable. The needs of young people in fragile states are constantly shifting as the sociopolitical and economic situations in those countries change. Funders should include in their strategy a plan to continually assess and engage young people in meeting these changing needs.

# Notes

1. See UN Security Council (UNSC), Resolution 2250, Youth, Peace, and Security, S/RES/2250 (December 9, 2015), [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2250\(2015\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2250(2015)); and African Union, “African Youth Charter,” 2006, [www.au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/7789-treaty-0033\\_-\\_african\\_youth\\_charter\\_e.pdf](http://www.au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/7789-treaty-0033_-_african_youth_charter_e.pdf).
2. See UNSC, Resolution 2535, Youth, Peace, and Security Biennial Reporting Requirement, S/RES/2535 (July 14, 2020), [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2535\(2020\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2535(2020)); and Resolution 2419, Reaffirmation of the Importance of Youth in Peacebuilding, S/RES/2419 (June 6, 2018), [https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2419\(2018\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2419(2018)). Resolution 2419 urged stakeholders to facilitate the full and equal participation of young people in peace and decision-making processes at all levels. The resolution also requested the secretary-general to report on the implementation of Resolutions 2250 and 2419 no later than May 2020.
3. United Nations, Agenda Item 65, The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace, and Security, A/72/761–S/2018/86, March 2, 2018, <https://undocs.org/en/A/72/761>.
4. For information about the Agency for Peacebuilding, see [www.peaceagency.org/en/](http://www.peaceagency.org/en/).
5. For more information on the United States Institute of Peace’s grants program and its Generation Change Fellows Program, see [www.usip.org/grants-fellowships/grants](http://www.usip.org/grants-fellowships/grants) and [www.usip.org/programs/generation-change-fellows-program](http://www.usip.org/programs/generation-change-fellows-program), respectively.
6. For an explanation of this methodology, see Better Evaluation, “Contribution Analysis,” [www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/contribution\\_analysis](http://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/contribution_analysis).
7. For details of the Generation Change youth grant program, see “USIP Announces New Grants for Youth Peacebuilders,” United States Institute of Peace, October 22, 2019, [www.usip.org/press/2019/10/usip-announces-new-grants-youth-peacebuilders](http://www.usip.org/press/2019/10/usip-announces-new-grants-youth-peacebuilders).
8. See Peter Woodrow and Nick Oatley, “Practical Approaches to Theories of Change in Conflict, Security & Justice Programmes,” CDA Collaborative and UK Department for International Development, March 2013, [www.cdacollaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Practical-Approaches-to-Theories-of-Change-Part-I.pdf](http://www.cdacollaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Practical-Approaches-to-Theories-of-Change-Part-I.pdf).
9. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an approach to enquiry that involves “researchers and participants working together to understand a problematic situation and change it for the better” (“Participatory Action Research,” Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, [www.participatorymethods.org/glossary/participatory-action-research](http://www.participatorymethods.org/glossary/participatory-action-research)).
10. Three Youth Advisory Council members—Sarra Messaoudi, Mridul Upadhyay, and Abdiweli Waberi—led the process of mining the meta-review for recommendations.
11. Roger A. Hart, *Children’s Participation: The Theory and Practice of Involving Young Citizens in Community Development and Environmental Care* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1997).
12. Ilona Dougherty, “The Youth-Friendly Guide to Intergenerational Decision-Making Partnerships,” National Democratic Institute, 2004, [www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/2061\\_citpart\\_youth\\_010104\\_5.pdf](http://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/2061_citpart_youth_010104_5.pdf).

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