Youth-Centered Peacebuilding Framework

Rethinking youth inclusion through a youth-powered approach

Rebecca Ebenezer-Abiola

UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE
Making Peace Possible

The Youth-Centered Peacebuilding Framework is a functional guide that proposes an actionable approach for the centering of youth in peacebuilding interventions. The guide operationalizes the concept of youth participation, starting from core principles and moving to practical guidance and specific action steps for meaningful youth engagement at different stages of a peacebuilding project.

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Contents

Contributors

Alison Milofsky
Nilaya Knafo
Sarra Messaoudi
Mridul Upadhyay
Paul Lee
Paula Porras

Acknowledgment

The views expressed in this guide are those of the authors alone. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace. An online edition of this framework can be found on USIP's website (www.usip.org), together with additional information on the subject.

The Case for Centering Youth in Peacebuilding Projects

With more than 1.8 billion youth around the world, of whom more than 600 million currently live in conflict-affected areas, the experiences and perspectives of young people in peace and conflict are critical.[1]

Historically, young people have tended to be of interest to researchers and policymakers only in the roles of victims or perpetrators of conflict. This limited perspective has some grounding in fact: at least one in four youth across the world have been affected by violence or armed conflict, and some have been recruited into terrorist organizations or other armed groups.[2] The vast majority of young people who face social, political, or economic upheaval remain peaceful, however, and choose a path of peace rather than active involvement in violence.[3] Many young people in fragile states or conflict areas work to prevent and transform conflict within their communities. They foster understanding across ethnic and religious divides, strive for gender equality, and provide alternatives to violence on community, national, or regional levels. Young people have tremendous potential to be powerful agents of positive social change.

A definitive turn toward emphasizing youth contributions to peacebuilding emerged in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Recognizing the important contribution of young people to peacebuilding, UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) on Youth, Peace and Security nos. 2250, 2419, and 2535, of 2015, 2018, and 2020, respectively, have all called for the meaningful participation of young people in peacebuilding activities and peace processes. As young people are significantly affected by conflict, they should also be at the heart of finding alternatives to violence. It is not enough to give young people a seat at the table, however; their involvement must be vital and meaningful. Youth participation should not only be about numbers or representation—more important are the quality and depth of youth participation. Are young people invited to participate in

processes that have already gone beyond several decision points? Or are they at the heart of the decision-making and programming that affect them and their communities? Evidence shows that peace processes that center a range of actors, including women and young people, are more likely to succeed and to lead to a more sustainable peace.[4]

As part of USIP's broader Youth, Peace, and Security agenda, the Institute contracted the Agency for Peacebuilding to conduct a meta-review of fifty-one USIP-funded and USIP-implemented youth peacebuilding projects between 2011 and 2018. The evaluation recommended that USIP initiatives achieve higher levels of youth participation in the design of programs and increased positioning of young people to co-lead and co-decide on the peacebuilding activities that affect them. The meta-review also recommended more clarity in the definition of inclusion, an expansion of the types of youth engaged so as to avoid selection bias, and more attention paid to understanding the barriers to youth engagement and how to overcome them.

The framework proposed in this guide aims to fill the gaps identified in the meta-review by exploring what meaningful youth engagement means and by providing practical strategies to ensure that youth can be found at the center of peacebuilding projects and initiatives. While youth participation should be ensured in all peacebuilding efforts, including formal peace processes, the framework specifically explores youth engagement in peacebuilding projects and how youth participation can be embraced and enhanced in each stage of a peacebuilding project cycle.

For Whom and What is This Guide Intended

This guide is intended for organizations that implement youth programs or are thinking of working with youth.

The purpose of the guide is to explore how organizations can partner with young people to conceptualize, design, and implement peacebuilding projects. The guide operationalizes the concept of youth participation, starting from core principles and moving to practical guidance and specific action steps for meaningful engagement at different stages of a peacebuilding project. While this guide provides concrete recommendations for different stages of a peacebuilding project life cycle, it is not rigidly prescriptive: every conflict situation is different and requires unique forms of partnerships and project design. However, the guide does provide a framework for anyone who wants to partner with youth on a peacebuilding project and needs ideas on where to start. While this guide focuses specifically on providing a youth-centered focus to peacebuilding projects, the ideas presented in the guide can be tailored to peacebuilding processes generally.

Definition of Terms

The definitions of some terms as they are used in this guide and the framework follow.

Youth refers to the time of transition between childhood and adulthood. The term has no precise definition, however, because countries and communities characterize this transition differently. While the UN has not reached a consensus on the definition of youth, the UN General Assembly defines youth as individuals between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four years for statistical purposes and without prejudice to other UN member states.[5] Transition indicators differ across the globe, the exact timing and indicators varying according to social and cultural norms.[6]

Youth inclusion typically references a top-down approach to peacebuilding whereby those with power determine how youth will be included. In youth inclusion, youth often assume or are placed in the role of participants who are invited into a space by adults. In this approach, youth are not necessarily encouraged to take on the roles of partner, collaborator, or changemaker. A youth inclusion approach toward peacebuilding need not prioritize partnership and sustainability.

Youth-centered peacebuilding places youth at the center rather than on the periphery of peacebuilding. This shift in position for youth relies on a different worldview in which the lived experiences of youth and young people's knowledge and expertise are valued and understood to be at the core of peacebuilding work. Youth-centered peacebuilding adopts a youth-powered approach whereby initiatives are driven and powered by youth. Centering youth in peacebuilding does not mean displacing other actors or stakeholders, such as women and minoritized groups, who should also be at the center of peacebuilding initiatives. Instead, youth-centered peacebuilding embraces a collaborative stance whereby power and resources are shared across generations and stakeholders.

Creating a New Framework: Rethinking the Role of Power in Youth Engagement

Conversations around identity often involve power. Most social identities, e.g., race, class, and gender, have a group with social power and a group with comparatively little or no social power.

When thinking about youth, we start with a reflection on power: how is power understood in interactions that involve youth, who has power, who does not have power, and how is power used?

There are several ways to look at power. Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller in *A New Weave of Power, People and Politics* have categorized expressions of power as "power over," "power with," "power to," and "power within."[7]

Power over is the most common form of power. Power in this sense is seen as a win-lose dichotomy. Having "power over" involves taking power from someone else and using it to dominate and prevent others from gaining it. In efforts to engage young people, "power over" may take the form of a paternalistic display of power in which other/older actors assume they know what is best for youth regardless of youth's position on the issue. "Power over" could also take the form of discounting the voices of youth, imposing programs on them without their support, and downplaying their contributions.
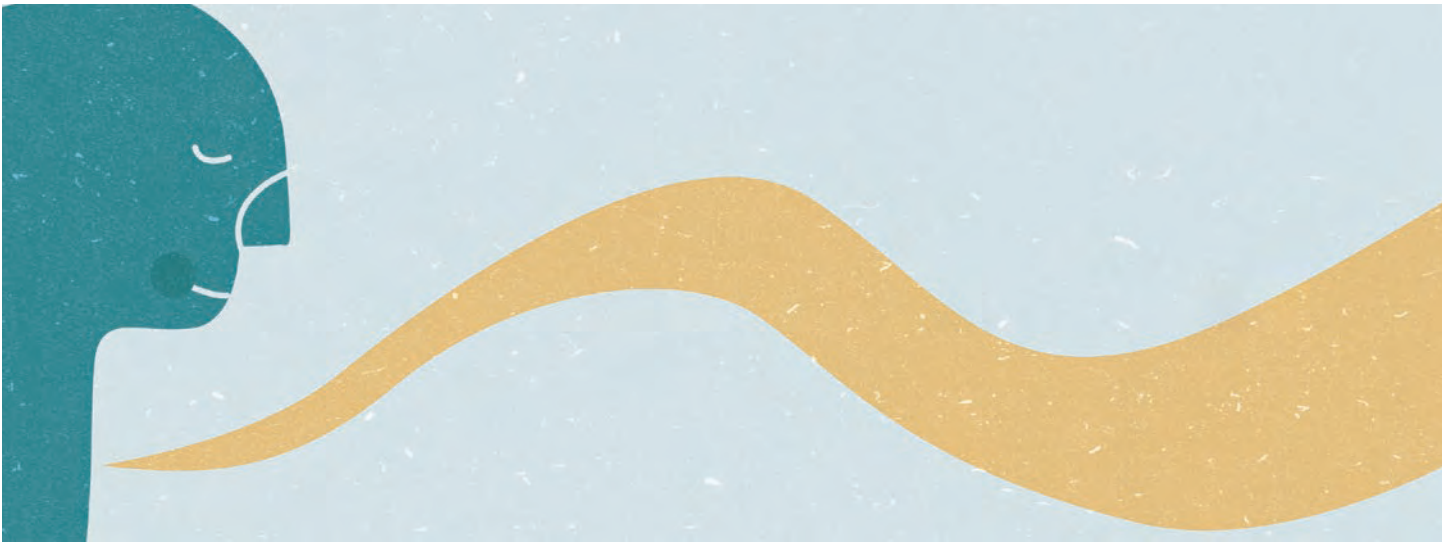
In contrast to the limiting effects of "power over," the three other expressions of power identified by VeneKlassen and Miller are positive and create a space for more equitable relationships. These alternatives are "power to," "power with," and "power within."

Power to is based in the belief that every individual has the agency and capability to make decisions about his or her own life. In engaging with youth, it is important to recognize that each young person has the "power to" make a significant difference in the world.

Power with recognizes that the validity of each person´s experiences and contributions can lead to a more collaborative effort. "Power with" involves coalition building, finding commonalities, and nurturing collective power through organization and collaboration. "Power with" builds on individual knowledge and talents and amplifies them. It is based in the spirit of solidarity and mutual respect for the gifts each person brings. "Power with" makes joint problem solving possible between young people and other stakeholders. Adopting the concept of "power with" helps bridge intergenerational barriers and opens a space for sharing knowledge and resources. It breaks down the traditional hierarchical "power over" approach, which limits young people's effective participation in peacebuilding processes.

Power within has to do with a person's sense of self-confidence, self-worth, and self-awareness. It undergirds an individual's ability to have hope, and affirms a person's dignity. Working with young people necessitates creating spaces for them to affirm and express their self-worth and ultimately to recognize their "power within." Engaging the "power within" is the antithesis of the traditional "power over" approach. "Power over" dampens young people's ability to see themselves as the agents of change that they are.

Another way to look at power is to examine what are commonly known as "spaces of power," arenas and forums where decisions are made, power is activated and exercised, and actions are carried

out.[8] These spaces of power have in turn been categorized as "closed spaces," "invited spaces," and "claimed spaces."

Closed spaces. In closed spaces, decisions are made by powerful actors behind closed doors. These spaces involve only the closed group that holds societal power, even when the deliberations under way will affect a wider spectrum of actors. Unfortunately, closed spaces are quite common in peacebuilding, especially during formal peace agreement negotiations or other peace processes. Young people are often excluded from closed spaces, which has led to a demand for greater transparency and youth representation in decision-making spaces.

Invited spaces. The demand to open closed spaces often leads to "invited spaces," whereby actors are invited or consulted for specific purposes and often within set boundaries. This process is often done in the name of "inclusion." Young people may find themselves invited to participate on panels or in forums, meetings, and consultations even as the power still firmly lies with those who extended the invitation. Invited spaces, while an improvement over closed spaces, limit effective engagement and are not designed to produce partnerships with young people.

Claimed spaces. In claimed spaces, people of like mind come together and set their own agenda. Claimed spaces are organic and have more equitable power distribution because each individual's power is recognized as contributing to a common good. Young people have had to create and claim these spaces for themselves, often through movements. In working effectively with young people, it is important to jointly create spaces where they are fully engaged, seen as partners, and valued, not simply treated as stakeholders invited for the sake of inclusion. In claimed spaces, power is shared and the collaborative "power with" approach is embraced.

What is a Youth-Powered Approach?

As UN Security Council Resolutions on Youth, Peace and Security (nos. 2250, 2419, and 2535) recognize, the lack of meaningful participation of young people in peacebuilding activities and peace processes is an ongoing global challenge.

While youth "inclusion" elevates youth visibility, it remains limited in terms of achieving equity through intergenerational partnership and collaboration. Therefore, to understand why sustainability has been difficult to achieve, we must first examine the problematic paradigm of "inclusion" and the dynamics of power that "inclusion" perpetuates. The process of understanding the role of youth in peacebuilding often justifies youth participation based on principles such as social marginalization, deprivation, and underrepresentation. For example, the UN defines social inclusion as "the process of improving the terms of participation in society, particularly for people who are disadvantaged, through enhanced opportunities, access to resources, voice, and respect for rights."[9] Identifying youth through a deficit lens that focuses first and foremost on a disadvantaged status diminishes the value and quality of youth

participation and contributions. The idea of "youth inclusion" sustains a top-down approach to peacebuilding in which traditional notions of power reign. Those with power determine when and how youth will be included, thus reproducing the system of power that positioned youth on the periphery at the outset. The unequal power distribution within this framework removes opportunities for shared responsibility, visibility, independence, and initiative in which youth embrace the role of a participant rather than that of a changemaker. To appreciate youth heterogeneity and young peoples' expertise and experiences, we must move beyond a youth inclusion approach and toward a youth-powered approach to peacebuilding.

The difference between a youth-powered approach and a youth-empowered approach to peacebuilding is that the latter takes a top-down approach that from the outset embraces a perception of youth as disadvantaged. Additionally, the notion of empowerment suggests that those with power have bestowed power on those without. To empower means to give someone the power to do something and connotes a paternalism that reproduces systems of oppression. On the other hand, a youth-powered framework places youth at the center of peacebuilding because youth are valuable changemakers and active partners. In a youth-powered framework, youth claim power rather than being given power.

A youth-powered approach is the mechanism for achieving youth-centered peacebuilding. A youth-powered approach sees youth as the heart of peacebuilding rather than an appendage. With youth at the center rather than on the periphery, "power with" replaces "power over"; collaboration and relationship building replace domination and control. A youth-powered approach champions growth and sustainability as it shifts beyond youth inclusion in its commitment to provide an equitable environment in which power and resources are shared intergenerationally. As part of this approach to peacebuilding, young people stand at the center, where they can inform each aspect of a project and communicate with a variety of stakeholders. With youth at the center, a space for the exchange of learning and mentorship emerges. Rather than focusing on youth disenfranchisement, a youth-powered approach reinforces the meaning of teamwork and emphasizes the quality of participation and the engagement of all members. The following pages provide a practical guide, informed by youth experiences and expertise, on how to embrace a youth-powered approach toward peacebuilding initiatives.

Principles of Youth Partnership

Prioritizing the needs of young people and meaningfully partnering with them in peacebuilding programming is an idea that is widely accepted but, unfortunately, infrequently realized.

Understanding the following principles is vital for putting youth partnership into practice. Many of these principles are outlined in the UN's "Guiding Principles on Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding."[10] While many of these principles are common to broader efforts to engage communities and to advance the engagement of a range of stakeholders, certain aspects are unique to securing effective youth participation.

Embrace respect. Respect for young people is at the core of any youth engagement. Practitioners who want to partner with youth in youth spaces or on youth issues must understand that young people are the experts on their own lives and that the lived experiences of youth provide a unique perspective on issues that affect them. Embracing respect includes recognizing and valuing the contributions of young people. It also includes treating young people with dignity, respecting their individuality, listening to understand, and doing away with labeling, stereotyping, and condescending and patronizing behavior or comments.

Focus on young people as shapers of peacebuilding efforts.
Young people are often seen as "targets," "objects," or "beneficiaries" of youth projects rather than as shapers of and partners in such projects. For any meaningful participation to occur, young people need to be engaged as people who have agency and competency, and who can be valuable partners in all stages of a peacebuilding project's life cycle. The project and process must promote their strengths and contributions.

Value and build on young people's diversity and experiences.
"Youth" is not a homogeneous group, and thus young people may have competing or differing opinions, interests, and experiences. Myriad factors make youth a highly heterogeneous category. From a peacebuilding perspective, "youth" includes young women and young men; gender and sexual minorities; young people with disabilities; young people living with HIV; indigenous young people; marginalized young people; young migrants; and young people who are stateless, internally displaced, refugees, or are affected by a humanitarian crisis or armed conflict.[11] Peacebuilding projects must value the range of identities they bring and place real importance on their experiences.

Be attentive to gender dynamics.
Engage female youth meaningfully without making assumptions about their roles or abilities. Be conscious also of factors that may hinder the full participation of young women, young men, as well as gender and sexual minorities. For example, engaging young women might require extra effort to build trust with families by showing them that activities will be held in safe spaces. Breaking down barriers that may impede the participation of young women and girls should be an integral component of an organization's youth participation policy.

Develop relationships and partnerships.
Build positive and trusting relationships with young people. These relationships should extend beyond the practitioner to encompass the practitioner's organization. Create an environment where young people do not feel oppressed, coerced, or used.

Review real expectations and results.
The participation of young people must lead to tangible outputs or clear results.[12] Be very clear as to how young people will be involved, and work with them to explore what the expected outcomes of that engagement might be.

- What are my motivations for partnering with young people?
- What role have youth played in conceptualizing the idea or project?
- What constitutes harm to young people on this project?
- How can we ensure that young people are protected from harm as a result of being associated with this project?

Ensure relevance and proximity of the issue. For young people to be involved and committed to a project, the issue must be of real concern to them.[13] It must be relevant to them on a material or psychological level. A peacebuilding project must be responsive to the needs of young people and must have some important value. To ensure relevance, young people must be able to shape the issue and advise practitioners on what is important to youth in a community or with respect to a particular subject.

Demonstrate commitment. Making sure that resources (human, financial, time) are available for the meaningful participation of young people is part of demonstrating commitment. Organizational support is a requirement for young people to take an active role in a project, and this commitment must be present and communicated from the beginning to the end of the process.

Do no harm. In working with young people, practitioners should bear in mind that peacebuilding is difficult work and may pose significant risk to young people, and potentially to each individual young person, depending on their individual circumstances. Every project must have a strategy to protect young people from external harm. Practitioners must ensure that they themselves are not a source of harm to the youth they are working with or serving. There must be a strategy in place to ensure that the project does not draw harm to the young people involved. For example, appearing in photographs may be dangerous for youth whose government finds their association with that project problematic. Regular conversations need to be had with the young people and risk factors assessed periodically so that necessary adjustments can be made.
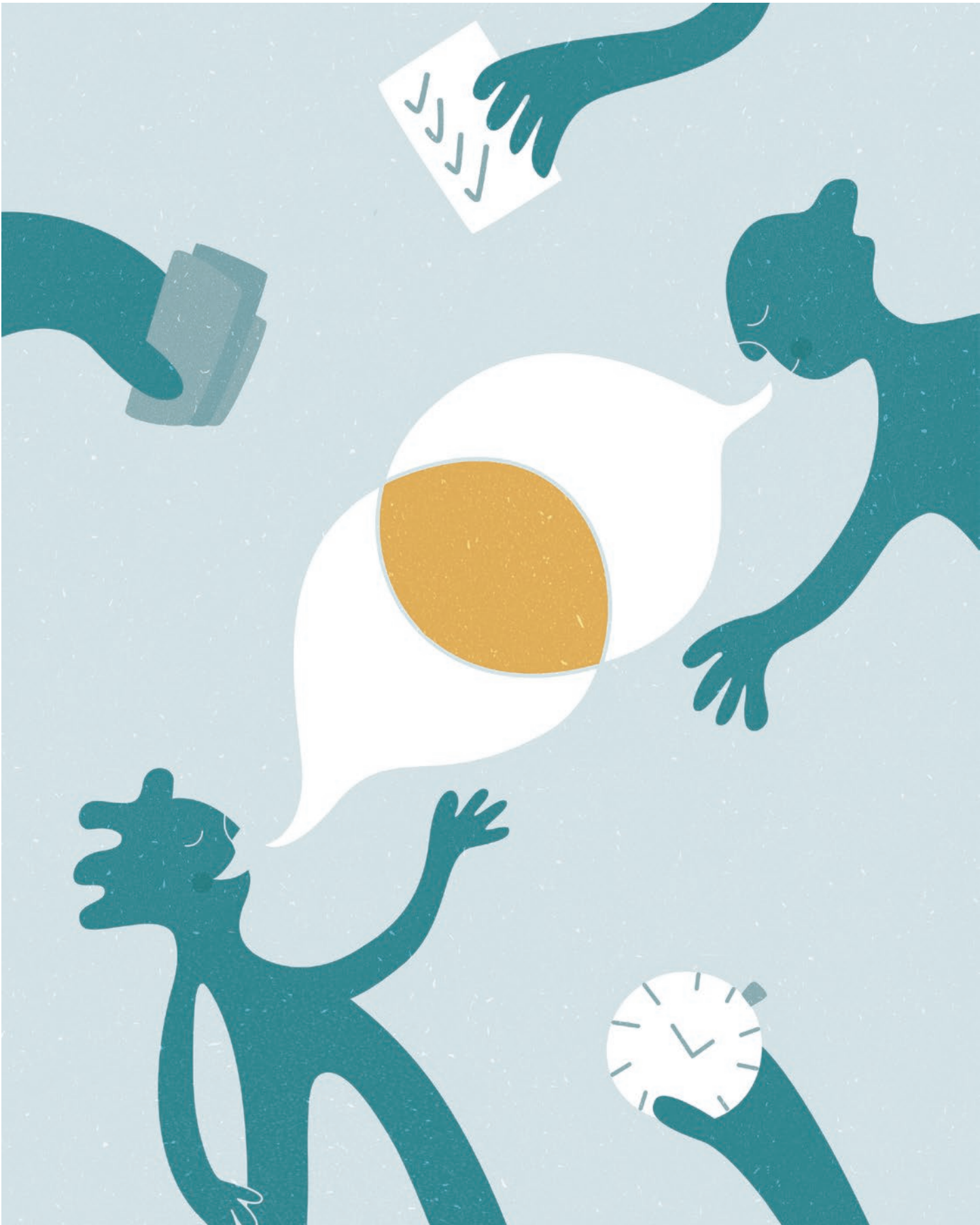
Five Stages of Youth Engagement in Peacebuilding Projects

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that young people are capable of forming their own views and have the right to express those views freely in all matters that affect them.[14]

Young people should be key actors and participants rather than mere recipients or beneficiaries. Beyond participation being a right of young people, research shows that policies, projects, and actions for a given target group are more effective when the target group is involved in developing the actions and policies that concern the group's members.[15] USIP's Youth-Centered Framework explores five stages of peacebuilding projects and how youth can be at the center in each stage. The stages are the following:

- Organizational/ Team Readiness
- Research and Knowledge Generation
- Project Design
- Project Implementation
- Project Monitoring and Evaluation

Organizational/
Team Readiness

Research and
Knowledge Generation

Project
Design

Youth

Project Monitoring
and Evaluation

Project
Implementation

Organizational/ Team Readiness

The first stage in effectively engaging young people in any project is for the organization (or team within an organization) to reflect on and assess its systems and processes with regard to working with young people, and then take the necessary steps to ensure that the team is ready, mentally and structurally, to partner with young people.[16] A useful model to consider is Kurt Lewin's four-step model of planned change, as adapted by the Youth Working Group of the DFID-CSO Children and Youth Network.[17] The steps in the model are diagnosis, unfreezing, moving, and refreezing. While this model concerns organizational development, it can also be applied to organizational preparedness for youth engagement.

Diagnosis. Diagnosis refers to a process of self-assessment, by a team or organization, that analyzes effective engagement with young people and possibilities for improvement. It entails analyzing the existing processes and structures within the organization and the suitability of these processes for youth engagement, identifying the desired goal of the project and the potential problems that may be faced, and exploring previous youth partnerships and reflecting on what worked and what did not.

A helpful tool that organizations and teams can use to assess their level of youth engagement and to set objectives during the design phase is Hart's ladder of young people's participation.[18] The sociologist Roger Hart identified eight modes of engagement of young people, corresponding to low to high degrees of participation: (1) manipulation; (2) decoration; (3) tokenism; (4) assigned and informed; (5) consulted and informed; (6) adult–initiated, shared decisions with young people; (7) young people–initiated and –directed; (8) young people–initiated, shared decisions with other stakeholders. It is critical to note that the lower levels of the ladder, stages 1–3, are ineffective modes of engagement that should be avoided. The highest rungs of the ladder are the levels that UNSCR 2250 recommends that organizations and teams alike should aspire to achieve.

Unfreezing. The assessment phase should include an analysis of barriers to effective collaboration with young people and how to remove these barriers. Unfreezing refers to consciously challenging existing norms that are counter to meaningful partnership with young people. Analysis should be rooted in an acute awareness that different groups within the youth demographic may have different barriers to participation. For example, the organization may need a gender strategy to ensure unhindered participation of young women and girls, as well as a strategy to include youth in marginalized or economically disadvantaged communities. The analysis could also explore the intergenerational dynamics or other relational dynamics between youth and society.

Moving. In the moving step, the self-assessment is used as the groundwork to take action to shift behaviors and attitudes to the desired state—in this case, to internalizing the principles and practices outlined in this framework, which could involve reorienting staff as to the importance of youth partnership and addressing any prejudice or skepticism that could prevent positive youth engagement.

Refreezing. Finally, refreezing entails putting in place strategies to make meaningful partnership and collaboration with youth a norm within the team or organization. Refreezing could include changing processes and procedures within the organization, expanding training sessions to include content on how staff can effectively implement the improved processes, instituting youth advisory councils, engaging youth in strategic and annual planning processes, and ensuring that youth are represented in decision-making within the team or organization.

Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation

Rung 8: Young people and adults share decision-making

Rung 7: Young people lead and initiate action

Rung 6: Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people

Rung 5: Young people consulted and informed

Rung 4: Young people assigned and informed

Rung 3: Young people tokenized*

Rung 2: Young people are decoration*

Rung 1: Young people are manipulated*

*Note: Hart explains the last three rungs are non-participation

Adapted from Roger Hart, *"Children's Participation: Tokenism to Citizenship,"* UNICEF International Child Development Centre, 1992, www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/childrens_participation.pdf

Guiding questions for practitioners

Some critical questions to get started:

- What are we aiming to achieve by partnering with young people?
- How does this project with youth align with the overall goal and mission of our organization?
- How ready are we to dedicate the required resources?
- How prepared are we to involve young people from start to finish?
- What are our expectations of this project and of the youth with whom we are working?
- How prepared are we to listen to and follow through on the recommendations of young people?

Key Actions

1. **Create a youth council.** A critical aspect of getting ready is the creation of a council of young people who can advise and guide the team on youth needs and the most effective mode of youth engagement. Work with the youth council to understand how to engage with youth within the scope of your project. Every other key action below is dependent on a successful partnership with youth. If you do not have a youth council, think critically about how you will get answers from youth to undertake the recommended steps below.

2. **Develop a participation strategy.** This strategy should state why and how youth will be engaged in the project. Work with the youth council to identify what groups of youth are to be engaged, and clearly enunciate the roles youth will play, including how much control youth will have during each stage of the project.

3. **Carry out a mapping exercise.** Work with the youth council to implement a mapping process to identify the diverse youth in a particular context. Representation is critical, but it is important to undertake the step of figuring out who should be represented, and to what end. For example, are there ethnic dimensions to a conflict that may have an impact on the engagement of youth from different ethnic backgrounds, religious affiliations, or other identities? What barriers to participation exist? What would enable participation?

4. **Train staff.** Appoint staff on your team to coordinate the project, and train them in how to work effectively with youth. Training could include developing staff skills in engaging and communicating with young people. Staff members should understand and embody the principles of youth partnership.

5. **Develop a recruitment strategy.** From your mapping exercise, develop a strategy as to how youth will be recruited as partners in the project. Ensure that youth from a range of backgrounds will be part of the project. This recruitment strategy will help ensure that you are recruiting passionate and qualified young people, attracting a range of voices, and not recycling the same sets of youth that have been part of several projects. The recruitment strategy could include expanding and diversifying your networks, incorporating the "snowball" method of identifying new youth voices, and thinking differently about "inclusion"—in sum, repositioning youth from the periphery to the center and identifying youth champions and high performers, as

well as those who are influencers in other ways in their communities. The recruitment strategy should consider how to involve marginalized groups, such as young girls and young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and what resources are needed to ensure their full participation at all levels of the project.

6. **Allocate budget and resources.** Set aside a budget for the project, and for all the processes that will involve youth engagement.

7. **Create structures for reflective practice.** Create a system for reflecting on and addressing issues of youth participation, equity, and social justice. A feedback loop with your youth council is essential for effective reflection.

Organizational/Team Readiness in Practice:
Volunteer Centre of Recife, Brazil

Rui Mesquita became the executive coordinator of the Volunteer Centre of Recife, a nonprofit organization in Brazil located in an area with low rates of volunteerism that seeks to increase volunteerism to help with social, cultural, and environmental projects in the Recife area.[19] From the start, Mesquita knew his first task would be to prepare nonprofit organizations to undertake their volunteer-led projects. This led him to begin by developing work methods for participation in volunteerism that previously did not exist. Coupled with his creation of these new methods, he organized a training course titled "Planning and Management of Volunteer Programs" aimed at grounding volunteer candidates in the concepts of volunteerism and working with young people. When reflecting on his experiences as a youth activist and leader with this project, Mesquita expressed, "Young people participating and exercising responsibility is essential, not only because they will be the beneficiaries and the leaders in the future, but also because so many of them are already playing decisive roles within their own communities."[20] After three months of preparation, in 2000 the Volunteer Centre of Recife launched a pilot program with over 150 volunteers from community-based organizations.

Research and Knowledge Generation

Youth participation in research and knowledge generation refers to the way young people are involved in conducting studies that investigate peacebuilding issues and add to the body of existing knowledge, especially from youth perspectives.[21] Youth participation in research and knowledge generation is vital because it centers young people and allows them to own the entire process of the project, and provides another lens through which to see the challenge—one that will be a critical component of any sustainable solution. Full participation builds trust between young people and those within the organization and, most important, greatly improves the way data are collected and analyzed because of youth's unique insights and perspectives.

Research can be carried out for a needs assessment, that is, to better understand the needs of the project audience. It can also be done to better understand the context and issues or for conflict analysis. The meta-review of youth peacebuilding projects conducted by USIP found that project implementers rely excessively on existing knowledge of the context in which they operate, leading them to forgo a formal needs assessment.[22] The evaluation found that this leads to blind spots that can be detrimental to a project's success.

When properly trained, young people can participate in all forms of research. Participatory action research (PAR) is an example of a methodology that puts those most affected by research, in this case youth, at the center.[23] PAR is based in the belief that people are the experts on their own lives and therefore they are the best starting point for any planning or action process.[24] PAR requires a power shift. It involves young people functioning as researchers, working with their peers to understand a situation, and jointly coming up with strategies to change that situation for the better. PAR is an iterative cycle of research that involves observation, action, and reflection. It uses a range of methods, both qualitative and quantitative.

Key Actions

1. **Develop a research plan.** Explore various research methods and develop a plan for the research process. Your choice of research method will depend on the type of project and on your expected outcomes.
2. **Partner with youth in determining the best research approach.** Go further and train youth from varied backgrounds in the chosen research method, including the design of research tools, the development of research questions, data collection methods, mobilization of respondents, and analyzing and communicating findings.
3. **Develop a communication strategy.** Develop a strategy with the youth partners as to how research findings will be used and disseminated.

Research and Knowledge Generation in Practice:

USIP Participatory Action Research for Advancing Youth-Led Peacebuilding, Kenya

In 2017, youth from marginalized communities in three Kenyan cities, Nairobi, Mombasa, and Kisumu, came together and responded to the question: "What is the most pressing issue affecting you and your community?" This question led to the generation of three distinct inquiries in which youth developed research questions and methodological designs.[25] Working in neighborhood-based teams, the youth researchers carried out data collection using both conventional and participatory methods, collectively analyzed and identified themes, and organized events at which the research findings were shared with the respective communities. The themes included tribalism, service delivery, gender, corruption, and security. The youth researchers went on to develop recommendations and ideas for youth-led solutions to the issues identified.

Guiding questions for practitioners

- How will young people lead this research process?
- How much do we (staff and youth) know about the conflict, and what roles will youth have in conducting a conflict analysis?
- What are the peacebuilding needs of the target group or community, and how do those needs relate to youth?
- What is the best approach to understanding these needs?
- How many and what kinds of resources do we have for this type of research?
- What role will youth have in designing the research questions and conducting the research?
- How are young people interpreting or analyzing the research findings?
- To what extent will youth be involved in writing about the research?
- What will we do with the research findings? How will we communicate and disseminate the findings? How will we engage youth in the dissemination plan?
- How will research findings change our initial assumptions regarding the project?
- How willing are we to make changes or shift perspective based on the findings?

Project Design

The centering of youth in the design stage of a peacebuilding project denotes the full participation of young people in the planning and conceptualization of initiatives to address particular peacebuilding challenges. It is important to engage young people at this stage, for several reasons:

- They will help ensure that the proposed intervention remains relevant and responsive to the needs of young people and the conflict context.
- They can bring a fresh perspective and creative ideas for dynamic peacebuilding programming.

Each peacebuilding situation is unique and requires a tailored approach or project design. An effective youth-centered design of a peacebuilding project is:

- Based on a solid needs assessment and conflict analysis that includes identifying blind spots otherwise not captured without youth participation and diverse inputs.
- Designed using a participatory approach with youth at the center, integrating the contribution of young people and giving ownership to those implementing and engaging in the project.
- Designed to include a well-thought-out theory of change.
- Iterative and flexible enough to change as conflict dynamics change.
- Designed to "do no harm," and therefore should include strategies to mitigate risks to youth.
- Designed with built-in indicators to determine whether change occurs at the end of the project, including indicators most relevant to youth.

⚙ Key Actions

1. **Review findings of research and conflict analysis with young people.** In addition to jointly reviewing research findings, continue to work with youth to highlight gaps and address assumptions.

2. **Jointly brainstorm areas of intervention.** The research will bring to light many critical problems that require intervention. Your project cannot solve all problems, so it is important to jointly decide with young people what areas your intervention will focus on, including those that resonate with them. Remember that focusing on certain demands inevitably means that other demands cannot be fully addressed.

3. **Establish a theory of change.** In simple terms, a theory of change helps you articulate what kind of change or results you want to see at the end of the project, what you need to get there, and why you have focused on a particular change. Theories of change must be based in the realities of the conflict context.

4. **Develop project activities.** The project activities should be designed to align with the theory of change, or the project will miss its mark. Young people's ideas for program design can result in creative and innovative interventions whereby young people bring fresh and nuanced perspectives to problem solving. Therefore, be sure to co-convene brainstorming sessions with young people and provide space to generate ideas for program implementation.

5. **Prepare for monitoring and evaluation.** A good project design already plans for evaluation by building in indicators to track what changes occur as a result of the project and how to measure those. Without clear indicators, it is impossible to know whether the project worked as intended and whether the desired results were achieved.

6. **Articulate the role of youth.** From the design stage, work with your youth council to articulate how much youth will be involved in the various stages of the project's implementation and evaluation.

7. **Develop a strong feedback system.** Put in place a strong feedback system to ensure that the project continues to be responsive to identified needs and the conflict context, and that it does no harm.

💡 Guiding questions for practitioners

- How are young people leading the design of this project? What roles are they playing?

- What have we learned about the role and contribution of youth from the conflict analysis conducted?

- Who defined what the problems are? Who defined what the interventions should be? What roles have youth played in both of those processes?

- What cultural factors related to youth engagement should we be thinking about as we design our intervention?

- What type of change do we want to see at the end of the project? How will we measure this change, and what outcomes are most relevant to youth participants?

- What do we have the capacity and resources to do? What intervention fits our organizational mandate and is also responsive to the findings of the conflict analysis?

Project Design in Practice:
Divé Maky—Wild Poppies (Young Roma Leaders), Slovakia

The Young Roma Leaders project in Slovakia is a youth-led project designed to train, mentor, coach, and support young Roma to advocate for the inclusion of Roma children in educational opportunities and to reduce the victimization of Roma in primary schools in the least-developed regions in Slovakia.[26]

The idea for the project originated with young Roma students who were on a scholarship program supported by the Divé Maky program. The Young Roma Leaders project was designed jointly with young people. In the first phase of the project, thirteen Roma youth were trained in leadership, communication, and advocacy skills. They were also trained in how to work with children and youth in primary schools. The project also selected and trained a group that mentors and coaches the young Roma leaders as they work in their own communities. Led by the young people themselves and with support from project staff, the young leaders come together every three months for regular coaching and mentoring sessions.

Project Implementation

Youth engagement in project implementation refers to the roles young people play in the delivery and execution of peacebuilding initiatives.

Young people can and are playing an array of roles in the implementation of peacebuilding interventions. They serve as consultants, peer educators, trainers, conveners and facilitators of dialogue processes, mobilizers, and so on. Actively engaging young people during implementation can increase project outcomes by:

- Increasing the effectiveness of communication strategies with target peer groups and hard-to-reach groups.[27]
- Facilitating community-wide adoption of youth-centered approaches. When young people have strong, positive relationships with the older members of the community, they can act as go-betweens to help communicate the purpose and advantages of these approaches.[28]
- Enhancing local ownership and context-specific delivery, as youth have already been working actively in these communities.
- Creating a sense of ownership among young people that adds to long-term sustainability.

An important tool in implementation of a peacebuilding project is the GANTT chart or project implementation schedule (PIS). A PIS chart clearly lists all the tasks necessary to complete the project and related deadlines. It is important to develop this schedule with youth partners, as the schedule will:

Help keep everyone on the same page on the many activities required to implement the project. It is also a great tool to help the implementation team know how much has been done and how the project is developing, and will become very valuable for the monitoring and evaluation phases of the project.

Clarify who is responsible for what. This is a way to help you track how many meaningful responsibilities youth partners are undertaking within the project. This will also highlight areas where capacity needs to be built for quality project implementation.

Give you an idea of how long it will take to complete a task. Knowing this will help youth partners appropriately plan other priorities and determine how much time they need to commit to the project.

Guiding questions for practitioners

- Who are the various stakeholders who should be engaged in this project? What will their roles be?

- What roles do youth play in this project? What training do they need to effectively carry out their tasks?

- What are the potential barriers to full youth participation in the implementation of this project?

- How can those barriers to full youth participation in the implementation of the project be removed?

Key Actions

1. **Develop a research plan.** Work with the youth partners in determining who does what. Ensure that meaningful roles are assigned to youth partners and that space is created for young people to contribute their knowledge and skills.

2. **Build youth capacity.** Support the training of youth in skills needed to effectively deliver their assigned tasks. Adopt a strengths-based approach that advances what youth already bring to the table, and provide a space for the continuous growth of those skills.

3. **Create activity teams.** Depending on the scope of the project and the number of youth partners involved, it may be necessary to divide the implementation team into smaller activity teams. This ensures that young people get all the support they need to carry out their assigned activities and keeps the teams focused. It could mean incorporating a mentoring element into the project's implementation by assigning mentors to each activity team.

4. **Set up a feedback structure.** Put in place a structure for a feedback loop. As young people implement projects, they will need feedback to help them learn, adapt, and improve. The same applies to those working with young people. A feedback loop is also important for the youth to help the project team know whether the project is still responding to the context or whether the conflict dynamic is changing. Pause-and-reflect sessions can be helpful to achieve these goals.

5. **Deal with conflicts.** Conflicts are inevitable and may arise as a result of differing thoughts and perspectives. Deal with these conflicts and tensions as they arise. Avoiding conflict can be detrimental to the overall project.

Project Implementation in Practice:
Generations for Peace, Jordan

Generations for Peace (GFP) is a Jordan-based international NGO dedicated to youth-led peacebuilding and sustainable conflict transformation.[29] The organization supports a growing volunteer movement of inspirational youth leaders. More than 8,300 volunteer youth leaders have been trained through the program. The project focuses on supporting volunteer youth-led actions for conflict transformation in communities in the following eight Middle East and North Africa–region Arab states: Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Tunisia, and Yemen.

Seventy leaders were selected from the eight countries and trained in GFP's curriculum and were supported to use sports, arts, and advocacy to engage with other youth and to carefully facilitate activities to support conflict transformation in different contexts. These young leaders are awarded and recognized as Generations for Peace Pioneers after they have implemented programs by training and mentoring other young people in their communities.

Project Monitoring and Evaluation

P roject monitoring and evaluation (M&E) measure the performance of a project. Effective M&E of a peacebuilding project should measure whether the positive outcomes posited by the theory of change have been realized. Youth participation at this stage refers to the active involvement of young people in the design of the M&E processes and the collection of data to determine the extent to which the project has achieved its objectives, followed by identification of lessons learned to provide input to the next project design cycle.

Monitoring runs through the entire life cycle of the project, from the design stage to the final evaluation.[30] Every project in conflict-affected and fragile contexts should monitor the following:

The context. Monitoring helps maintain ongoing awareness of the conflict dynamics.

The project's progress toward results. Project activities and indicators are monitored to track whether intended changes are occurring. Monitoring should also include the assessment of youth engagement and the extent to which the project continues to be youth centered.

The conflict sensitivity of regular program M&E. The monitoring process should take into account the conflict dynamics and ensure the project does not increase tensions or further the conflict in any way.

Project evaluation, though linked to monitoring, is distinct and can be characterized as the systematic and objective review of effective implementation, potential impact, and results of a project.[31] Evaluation may be done internally, by project staff and youth partners, or externally, by contracted evaluators. The choice depends on the scope, budget, time, and capacity required for the evaluation.

Working with youth to explore opportunities for them to meaningfully participate in M&E can promote leadership, critical thinking, and technical skills development.[32] Youth can participate in M&E as both subjects and leaders of the M&E process.[33] Young people can partner in a variety of ways, including by designing indicators and methods, gathering data, communicating results (report writing), and participating in review processes.[34] The evaluation process also affords an opportunity to reassess Hart's ladder of young people's participation together with young people and to evaluate the extent to which the project design and implementation have positioned youth at the center and shared power with them.

Key Actions

1. **Develop an M&E framework.** The indicators that will be measured should have been created prior to project implementation, at the design stage. An M&E framework is a work plan for M&E activities. The framework should answer such questions as what will be done, when will it be done, who will do it, and what kind of data will be gathered. The M&E framework should be done in a participatory process in partnership with youth.

2. **Train youth in M&E skills.** Simplify M&E terminologies and provide training for youth in M&E skills that they acknowledge they need to fully participate.

3. **Share findings.** Share the key learnings from the project. This can be done by publishing a report, or writing a series of blog posts or articles on key findings. Partner with youth as authors or co-authors of these reports and articles, and discuss these findings with community stakeholders. Partner with youth as authors or co-authors of these reports and articles.

4. **Establish a feedback loop.** Use what you have learned during the project process and from the findings of the evaluation. While the evaluation provides data on project results and outcome, it can also serve as a learning tool to influence future peacebuilding programming as well as add to the body of knowledge in the Youth, Peace, and Security space.

Guiding questions for practitioners

- What roles will youth play in the project monitoring?

- How appropriate is it for young people to evaluate this project?

- What M&E skills do the youth partners have? What skills do they need? How will you provide them with what they need?

- Beyond collecting data on the progress or performance of the project, what data are you gathering with regard to the benefits of active youth participation?

Monitoring and Evaluation in Practice:
U-Report—UNICEF, Multiple Countries

The U-report initiative launched by UNICEF is a social platform on which young people use their mobile phones to monitor national programs and policies that affect them.[35] The young people who use this platform are called U-reporters. Every week, U-reporters receive a poll on their phones in response to which they express their opinions and concerns about services in their country and what their priorities as young people are. This information is then used to facilitate dialogues with policymakers to ensure that youth issues are understood and prioritized by decision-makers. This project is a simple yet effective method to engage youth in monitoring national policies, services, and projects while also providing them a platform to provide real-time feedback. The U-report initiative is being implemented in multiple countries, including Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria, and Liberia.

Moving Forward with Youth-Centered Peacebuilding

Have you finished reading this framework and are now wondering where to begin? The process starts with you.

Every team or organization is made up of individuals, and each individual should not only be passionate about fully partnering with youth but also committed to doing the personal work to challenge any bias they might have about working with youth as partners. The starting point, therefore, is a "bias self-assessment." Acknowledge your own biases and how these biases might affect your work with young people or your ability to engage youth as essential partners. To check your own biases, take a moment to reflect on the prompts below. Ask your colleagues to also carry out the self-assessment. Awareness of and acknowledgment of your own biases is a starting point for you to do the work of overcoming those biases and effectively working with youth.

1. When I think about a leader, what image comes to mind?

2. What age does someone have to attain before I can consider that person a leader?

3. How do I generally feel about young people's leadership?

4. What are some assumptions I have about young people?

5. What have I been told about the capacity of young people?

6. What do I believe about young people's attitude regarding work?

7. How do I feel about receiving advice from someone younger than I am?

8. What ways have I been taught to interact with young people in the workplace?

9. Which of the above thoughts or messages had the most lasting effect on my ability to work with young people?

10. Which of the above thoughts or messages had the most negative effect on my interaction with young people?

Conclusion

A peacebuilding initiative, whether youth focused or not, should incorporate a youth lens and engage young people, whose ideas about and solutions to some of the toughest challenges are absolutely essential to achieving durable, sustained peace around the world.

While this framework has proposed key action steps that can be taken at each stage of a project, it is important to note that every conflict situation is different, and the readiness of young people to be engaged in a project may likewise differ from place to place. It is therefore more important for a project team to be constantly aware of conflict dynamics and context and to change tactics and methods as needed to achieve the best outcomes. The creation of a youth council in your organization can help you maintain a finger on the pulse on youth readiness.

It is important for peacebuilding organizations and teams to institutionalize a youth-powered approach and not make it an ad hoc response. Finally, the concept of do no harm must be at the heart of any peacebuilding program. What constitutes risks for young people varies within the demographic itself and from place to place. Therefore, an acute awareness of what could expose young people to unnecessary risk is paramount.

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Youth-Centered Peacebuilding Framework

The Youth-Centered Peacebuilding Framework is a functional guide that proposes an actionable approach for the centering of youth in peacebuilding interventions. The guide operationalizes the concept of youth participation, starting from core principles and moving to practical guidance and specific action steps for meaningful youth engagement at different stages of a peacebuilding project.

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INSTITUTE OF PEACE
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2301 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20037
202.457.1700
www.USIP.org