"BEING AND BECOMING A PEACEBUILDER"

Insights from 20,000 hours
of youth-led dialogues
in the Horn of Africa

Submission to the Progress Study on
United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250
on Youth, Peace and Security

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BUILDING OF PEACE SINCE 1985
OVER
30
YEARS

**Life&Peace
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'Being and Becoming a Peacebuilder' in Brief

The following written submission to the Progress Study on UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security (2015) is the outcome of an institutional reflection process of the Life & Peace Institute's peacebuilding engagement with youth across diverse contexts in the Horn of Africa over the past 30 years.

"Being and Becoming a Peacebuilder" puts forward key insights and resultant recommendations inspired from an analysis of a conflict transformation methodology, called Sustained Dialogue. The Life & Peace Institute has been implementing Sustained Dialogue processes, with nearly 8,500 young women and men, in Ethiopia and Sudan within university settings since 2009 and 2013 respectively, and in Kenya in urban informal settlements in the capital, Nairobi, and in marginalised urban and rural areas in the north-eastern part of the country since 2016.

Across these three contexts diverse young women and men face compounded, entrenched socio-political and socio-economic dynamics of marginalization. This deep-rooted exclusion further hinders youth's meaningful inclusion and participation in decision-making processes, and specifically in peace processes. As Section 2 on the context stresses, a fundamental challenge to youth's meaningful inclusion in peace and security efforts is the narrow and homogenizing definition "youth" - thus obscuring the multiplicity and complexity of young women and men's identities.

Building on lessons and insights gleaned from 20,000 hours of youth-led dialogues, this submission primarily focuses on echoing and relaying the voices of diverse young women and men with whom the Life & Peace Institute and its partners have engaged, in order to be genuinely true to local experiences across the Horn of Africa.

From this evidence base, the Life & Peace Institute and its partners have articulated four main insights. These four insights and resultant implications for the Youth, Peace and Security agenda constitute building blocks for recommendations towards making Pillar 1 – Participation, and Pillar 2 – Prevention in UNSCR 2250 operable. The insights, which are described more fully together with broader implications and actor-and level-specific recommendations in Section 4, are summarised below.

Insight 1 – Youth are not a homogeneous group

Definitions of youth are contested, in particular by youths themselves, and fail to capture the diversity, multiplicity, complexity and divisions inherent to a category too often approached as homogeneous. As such, the rationale behind young peoples' meaningful inclusion in peace and security processes needs to be based on a complex understanding of their specific – and diverse – needs, interests and positions.

Insight 2 – The notion that there are "youth issues" is misleading and unhelpful

Young women and men are often structurally pigeonholed to care about and speak on so-called 'youth issues' and engage in particular forms of participation seen as youthful (in some cases, this means frivolous, entertaining, or social) such as through sports, arts and leisure, and increasingly, technology. Youth should be included in initiatives aiming to address broad societal issues, and not only on 'youth issues' based on stereotypes and assumptions about what youth are interested in and can speak on. Youth, in their plurality, should also have the space to define their issues and act upon them – not just sit at the table, but also shape the agenda. This would avoid reinforcing the perception that youth's participation be limited to a narrow agenda, predetermined by non-youth stakeholders. In relation to agenda-setting around prevention and peacebuilding, young people's diverse visions of positive peace in their respective communities, countries and worldwide should co-shape the overall direction of peace processes at all levels. Young people want to be taken seriously and if given the opportunity, many want to contribute in a substantive way on the biggest challenges facing their whole communities.

Insight 3 – Youth are the present as well as the future

Youth should be seen as agents of change 'now' and not only 'tomorrow', and be trusted enough to lead and own their peace initiatives. Youth need to be meaningfully included in long-term processes, in particular due to the transitional stage they experience – while they are leaders within their communities now, they may also go on to more formal leadership roles. Young people's present-day leadership is rarely seized upon in a proactive fashion, and most policies are developed reactively and therefore fail to anticipate contemporary youth challenges, in the face of a constituency that represents the 'moment'. As such a sense of urgency should be strengthened among diverse stakeholders, at all levels.

Insight 4 – Youth need an enabling environment

Closing civil society space affects youth initiatives and engagement disproportionally, as their marginality is compounded. At the same time, young people have showed that they are well-equipped to find alternative (and virtual) spaces and forms to engage, as they are less entrenched in 'peacebuilding as usual'. Supporting these spaces for engagement can also begin to challenge the prevailing stereotypes on youth – debunking them by providing evidence that is contrary to perceptions of youth as 'idle', 'problematic' or 'perpetrators of violence'. It is necessary, therefore, to make visible young people's contributions through studies, analyses and evaluations, and by allowing/freeing young people to express the nuances in their diverse make-up, as well as show leadership. The enabling environment and quality of the space is critical – it should be safe, autonomous, and co-option free (from government, but also externally imposed agendas from international (non-) governmental organisations and donors).

1. Setting the Scene

United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250[1] on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS), adopted in 2015, is a milestone in the recognition of the positive and crucial role young women and men play in the promotion of sustainable peace. By promoting youth as key participants in processes at all levels to achieve peace, UNSCR 2250 offers a framework, and guidance, for ensuring meaningful participation for these traditionally-excluded actors.

Two years after the adoption of the Resolution, most of the work needed to translate norm into practice remains. Despite a growing emphasis on youth as peace actors and the important role youth already play in conflict prevention and resolution, young women and men tend to remain absent from formal and informal peace processes, or their inclusion is tokenistic – with their present and potential leadership in building lasting peace remaining largely untapped. Promoting meaningful youth participation and involvement in peacebuilding and conflict transformation requires understanding of young women and men's specific challenges, and obstacles to their inclusion across a variety of contexts. In addition, insights on their unique position and ability to shape peace processes in ways that break with traditional thinking are necessary in order to support those working on peace and security to develop strategies, programmes, and policies that allow young women and men to take part in efforts to achieve inclusive peace in relevant, sensitive, sustainable and innovative ways at all levels.

As part of the Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS), mandated by the Resolution in Article 20, the Life & Peace Institute (LPI) was requested to provide actionable recommendations based on the organisation's experience, practice, and analysis of working with youth across a diverse set of contexts in the Horn of Africa over the past 30 years. In this spirit, LPI embarked on an institutional reflection process to explore, question and assess the organisation's experience in implementing – in partnership with local organisations and with young women and men – a dialogue-to-action conflict transformation methodology called Sustained Dialogue. LPI has been supporting Sustained Dialogue projects in Ethiopia and Sudan within university settings since 2009 and 2013 respectively, and in Kenya in urban informal settlements in the capital, Nairobi, and in marginalised urban and rural areas in the north-eastern part of the country since 2016. The lion's share of LPI-supported Sustained Dialogue work has largely been spearheaded by its long-standing partner in Ethiopia, the Peace and Development Centre (PDC) and is a testimony to the power of what collaborative partnerships for peace, across continents, can produce.

In the following submission to the Progress Study, LPI approaches Sustained Dialogue as a vehicle to promote youth engagement in peacebuilding in the Horn of Africa, and at a global scale, to draw conclusions on effective approaches that consider the views and agency of youth themselves.

As part of this analysis, LPI brought together its own staff, its Ethiopia partner PDC as well as young people that have participated in Sustained Dialogue projects from Ethiopia, Kenya and Sudan, to jointly reflect on progress made, lessons learned, and remaining challenges based on the organisation's experience. Conclusions from the joint reflections provided the groundwork for this submission, and emphasised LPI's commitment to ensuring recommendations reflect the views, needs, and specific experiences of youth, rather than speaking on their behalf, as well as providing a space for critical assessment of UNSCR 2250 and the work needed going forward to ensure its practical implementation.

2. Context Snapshots: YPS in the Horn of Africa

Youth Definitions in the Horn: Today's youth group is the largest the world has ever known, and the African continent has the largest youth population in the world. This "youth bulge" is numerically and socially visible across the Greater Horn, but as in other parts of the world, official definitions of "youth" remain fluid, grounded in country-based understandings, and often contested. The definition of 'youth' in UNSCR 2250, listed as *"persons of the age of 18-29 years old"*, falls within the common, if contested, age-defined perspective, which draws on a conventional understanding of "youthhood" as a simplistic, single, gender-equal age of maturity. This age category differs widely from country to country. In Kenya, the 2010 Constitution defines a youth as an individual of the age of 18-35, similarly to the 2008 Sudan Housing and Population Census, while Ethiopia's National Youth Policy (2004) defines youth as those aged between 15-29[2].

Youth Inclusion & Participation in the Horn: Across the region, young women and men tend to be excluded from formal politics and decision-making processes. At the national level, in particular in Sudan and Ethiopia, high-entry barriers to formal politics persist with high-level positions mostly held by older generations. This generational blockage prevents the majority of young people from accessing not only the political spheres, but also formal and informal decision-making processes at national and local levels. Traditional and cultural values and norms tending to associate authority and power with age are still deeply entrenched across the three countries' diverse cultures, and fall within a global tendency to associate youth with immaturity (see stereotypes reflection on page 21). Furthermore, political co-option of youth is widespread (particularly around elections) and youth's limited participation in decision-making or political processes tends to be channelled and controlled, thereby strengthening top-down approaches that consider that youth should do as told. Tightly regulated national political space, or narrower civic space, by older generations makes it challenging for young women and men, across socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic groups, and other identity markers, to access resources, exercise their rights, and generate the required legitimacy to be active in the public space.

In addition to this socio-*political* exclusion, in the broad sense of the term, young women and men across the three countries tend to face a socio-*economic* exclusion, contributing to an extended and increasing phase of uneasiness and "waithood"[3]. This uncertainty is especially visible when it comes to under/unemployment, particularly affecting young women and men. In Kenya for instance, at least 20% of the youth population are unemployed and underemployment[4].

Youth & Violent Conflict in the Horn: Intra- and inter-state conflicts in the region have been exacerbated and reinforced by complex webs of causes and drivers comprising governance challenges, 'militarisation' of violence, regionalization of conflict dynamics, ecological crisis, socio-economic crisis and inequitable socio-economic development. Youth have been viewed as key protagonists in conflicts as participants and recruits in military forces, militias, insurgent forces and as levies in inter-communal conflicts. Youth are also associated with other forms of insecurity in the region such as piracy, illegal migration and various forms of criminality. However, a reductionist and simplifying logic tends to limit the discussion on youth and violent conflicts, viewing youth as either perpetrators or victims.[5] A related aspect is also the tendency to securitize youth and youth issues on the part of governments, donors, media and civil society.

Youth in Peace Processes in the Horn: Formal and informal, traditional and more contemporary peace processes, including systems of conflict resolution, and peace agreements have mostly been the exclusive preserve of older male generations, across the Horn. This deep-rooted exclusion of young women and men from peace efforts, at different levels, is one of the most visible effects – and reinforcing factors - of the structural socio-political exclusion of youth briefly explored above. Both formal and informal systems of authority in the Horn are heavily infused with elements of gerontocracy.

Nevertheless, the growing recognition of the benefits of inclusiveness in peace processes, among international, national and local stakeholders, is leading to perceptible positive shifts in peacebuilding theory and practice. LPI has observed that youth participation and inclusion in peace processes tend to be more advanced in local level processes with reference to inter-communal conflicts, especially in pastoralist areas of the region. Key methodologies that foreground youth have become popularized such as community radio shows and sports competitions between previously antagonistic communities.[6] As for youth participation and inclusion in Track I peace processes, they are still limited, often tokenistic, and youth needs, interests and positions are often reduced to issues of education and employment.[7]

Young women and men across the three countries face entrenched social, cultural and economic obstacles that hamper their meaningful inclusion in political and decision-making processes, including in peace processes, at all levels. Yet, as bleak as this description sounds, *young women and men in the region also make the most of the resources they possess, and wield the social capital necessary to influence positive change at the individual, community, and structural levels*; one such example being Sustained Dialogue.

3. Ten Years of Sustained Dialogue in the Horn of Africa

LPI has been accompanying, in partnership with local organisations, a dialogue-to-action methodology called Sustained Dialogue for the past decade in the Horn of Africa, specifically in university settings in Ethiopia and Sudan and in urban informal settlements and marginalised rural areas in Kenya. These multiple Sustained Dialogue projects constitute a practical example of youth working together to conduct dialogues and design collaborative actions as a way to contribute to the reduction of mistrust and inter-group tensions that frequently result in violent conflict, with lessons applicable to national-level peace processes. LPI's experiences with the approach demonstrate that, if supported, youth can transform violent conflict, and that their inclusion in both formal and informal processes (from local to international levels) leads to more sustainable peace outcomes (see Examples of Peace Outcomes and Impact p. 10).

The Sustained Dialogue methodology was originally conceptualised in 1970s by the U.S. diplomat Dr. Harold H. Saunders as a dialogue-based conflict resolution tool and to date, has been applied to numerous contexts and conflicts.[8] To address root causes and drivers of violent conflict, the model posits that broken and conflictual relationships should be improved first. Sustained Dialogue therefore aims to influence positive attitudinal and behavioural change at the individual and relationship level within and between diverse, and sometimes adversarial, individuals and groups, in addition to contributing to a broader change beyond the dialogue participants through the action component. While Sustained Dialogue was not initially designed solely for youth-led projects, LPI has exclusively implemented the methodology with over 660 groups of diverse young women and men across the three countries in the Horn, based on the rationale that this transformative dialogue methodology has a stronger and more sustainable impact when implemented with young people who are in the process of identity formation or for some, re-imagination of identity. Barriers and opportunities vary from one context to another and a "one-size-fits-all" approach does not reflect the distinct challenges faced by youth across diverse countries. The potential of Sustained Dialogue as a methodology is in its adaptability. By allowing youth themselves to define their concerns and the difficulties they face, Sustained Dialogue increases their ability to ensure youth-specific needs are met.

Sustained Dialogue, as applied by LPI is an inclusive, participatory and youth-owned peer-to-peer dialogue process, which allows for diverse youth across identity boundaries to exchange and learn from others' perspectives and experiences, and to reach common ground, in order to design collaborative actions aimed to address the root causes and drivers of conflict in their broader communities. During a Sustained Dialogue process, young women and men not only (re)build positive social ties, contribute to deconstructing negative patterns for engagement, and challenge mutual stereotypes, they also strengthen their own confidence in their abilities

What is Sustained Dialogue?

Sustained Dialogue is a five-stage process that takes place within dialogue groups of 8-15 participants (in this case, drawn from a youth constituency), reflective of community diversity, and facilitated by two trained peer moderators that are themselves drawn from the community. Each group meets regularly to build relationships and develop informed strategies to improve intra- and inter-group relationships, especially around the following dimensions of identity: ethnic or clan belonging, religion, gender, socio-economic status, geographic background, urban/rural identity, among others.

The Dual Agenda of SD: 1. Build relationships "in the room", and 2. Address concrete community issues outside of the dialogue space, through the fifth stage of informed peace action/s.

Five stages of SD:

1. **Who**: diverse participants commit to engage in a sustained way

2. **What**: dialogue participants exchange experiences and start (re) building trust, strengthening their understanding of each other, and reaching a common ground.

3. **Why**: dialogue participants identify and analyse the problems, the issue being discussed and identity the root causes.

4. **How**: dialogue participants collaboratively brainstorm solutions to problems identified in stage 3.

5. **Now**: dialogue participants design and implement an informed action within the broader community.

The dialogue space allows young participants to examine their own attitudes about the others inside the room and the backgrounds each represents, in an open learning space.

Sustained Dialogue is based on the theory that relationship-building will lead to strategic, relevant, sensitive and informed actions and choices; and actions can only be collaboratively implemented by cohesive groups.

Sustained Dialogue is sustained in multiple ways: each Sustained Dialogue group maintains the same participants and moderators over an average seven-month period; each meeting is designed to continue where the last ended; and dialogue groups meet at an appointed time twice in a month time for at least two hours.
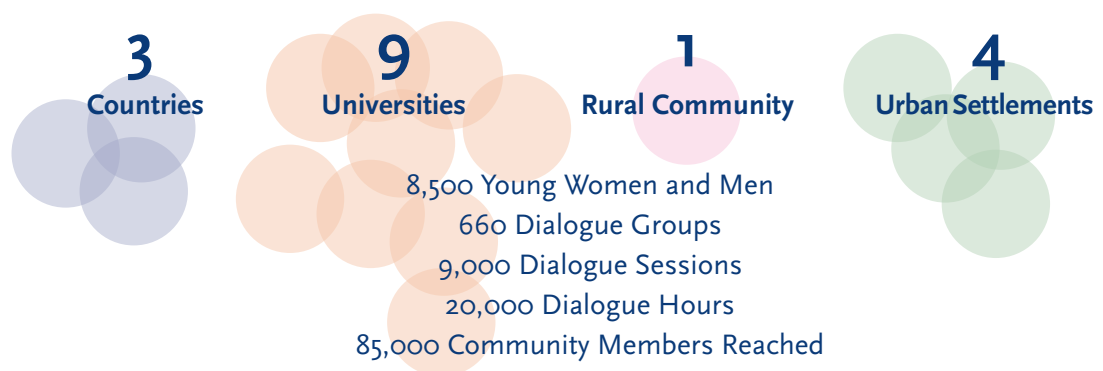
and unique position to become key actors in peace efforts. Sustained Dialogue processes both channel youth's unique potential for positive change and accompany the involved youth in overcoming the structural barriers to their participation in peace processes. Through Sustained Dialogue, both youth participation in peace processes and their role in the prevention of violent conflict, Pillars 1 (Participation) and 3 (Prevention) of UNSCR 2250, are fostered.

Sustained Dialogue processes support diverse youth in overcoming the traditional barriers to their inclusion in peace processes through the following key principles:

◆ Involved youth are "given a stake" in their societies by participating in a transformative project.

◆ Involved youth own the dialogue agenda, and define topics for discussion.

◆ Participating youth transform their understanding of other groups within an alternative safe space for engagement.

◆ Sustained Dialogue embraces the inherent complexity and heterogeneity of youth groups and recognises their divisions, allowing for positive changes within and between youth and the broader society.

◆ Through ongoing accompaniment, Sustained Dialogue supports young women and men in enhancing the capacities, skills and knowledge needed to develop sustainable solutions to violent conflict.

Sustained Dialogue in Numbers

Since its 2009 launch in Ethiopia, youth-led Sustained Dialogue process in the Horn of Africa, accompanied by LPI, has grown to:

3
Countries

9
Universities

1
Rural Community

4
Urban Settlements

8,500 Young Women and Men
660 Dialogue Groups
9,000 Dialogue Sessions
20,000 Dialogue Hours
85,000 Community Members Reached

Examples of Peace Outcomes and Impact

◆ **Individual level changes**: A randomised control trial of Sustained Dialogue at Addis Ababa University in 2009-10 found that, following participation in Sustained Dialogue, individual participants' attitudes were positively affected. Levels of trust between students of different ethnic backgrounds were markedly improved

(27% of participants stated that 'most people can be trusted', compared to 17% of the control group). The field trial also found that students became more aware of the problems at hand, and more engaged on pressing issues.[9]

◆ **Interpersonal and Intergroup**: In urban informal settlements in Nairobi, youth dialogue participants have emphasised the positive impact of Sustained Dialogue on their sense of purpose and belonging. Instances of intergroup change include participants coming together across ethnic dividing lines to make a stand for peace after instances of violence. And in university programmes, students spoke of Sustained Dialogue as the reason for them having developed friends across ethnic and religious lines.

◆ **Community level changes:** In Dujis, Garissa County, Kenya, youth participating in the Sustained Dialogue process independently came together to lobby the local authority to re-

Sustained Dialogue Sites

open Dujis Primary School. The school had been closed due to inter-sub-clan violence in the area and occupied by the local administration police. In one Sudanese campus, Muslim Sustained Dialogue participants came to understand the difficulty for their Christian peers to find prayer space and helped to successfully advocate for a space to be made available to all. One of the Sustained Dialogue participants from Dalanj University in South Kordofan State, Sudan, returned to his home village in West Kordofan and successfully advocated with the community elders for dialogue between two conflicting community groups.

◆ **Society writ large**: A Sustained Dialogue graduate from Addis Ababa University, inspired by his experience with Sustained Dialogue, produced and established an on-air reconciliation reality radio show called Ye'erq maed with a potential reach of millions of Ethiopian listeners every week.[10]

Four Insights from Sustained Dialogue Practice in the Horn of Africa

From this rich evidence base of 20,000 hours of youth-led dialogues in the Horn of Africa, LPI and its partners in Ethiopia, Kenya and Sudan have drawn the following four major insights.

1. **Youth are not a homogeneous group**: It should be recognised that youth are as diverse and divided as the rest of the population, and in conflict-affected and fragile settings will be subject to the same social, economic, and identity-based fractures that characterise the broader context.

2. **The notion that there are 'youth issues' is misleading and unhelpful**: Young people are able to speak to the pressing issues of conflict, governance, justice and development that affect their countries, beyond areas traditionally considered youth-specific, such as education, employment, drug and alcohol abuse.

3. **Youth are the present as well as the future**: Youth are leaders now, not just for tomorrow, and their existing knowledge and capacity should be leveraged to deal with ongoing peace and security challenges.

4. **Youth need an enabling environment**: Young people require safe space for engagement and exploration, and to build their confidence, in order to develop common agendas and have their voices heard

These insights are not novel per se and largely align with the current YPS discourse, but are helpful in that they are strongly supported by evidence and real experience, over a substantial period of time in several contexts, and fresh in that they further "complexify" mainstream YPS thinking. LPI believes these lessons are globally relevant and result in policy and practice recommendations fundamental to making UNSCR 2250 operable.

4. Global Insights and Implications for the YPS Agenda

Considering the characteristics of LPI's peacebuilding approaches, the organisation is best placed to provide recommendations around Pillar 1 – Participation, and Pillar 2 – Prevention.

1. Youth are not a homogeneous group

LPI's experience working with diverse youth highlights the need to embrace the complexity of the lived realities and peace aspirations of young women and men in conflict-affected/post-conflict environments, as a way to promote their effective and sustainable inclusion in shaping peaceful futures in their contexts. LPI's gathered evidence from Sustained Dialogue processes calls for this nuancing effort. For instance, Ethiopian students participating in dialogues tended to "self-segregate" according to their ethnic belonging, e.g. by sitting or engaging in working groups with students from their own background. Similarly, 60% of students from Ahfad University for Women in Khartoum, Sudan, considered that they interacted negatively with students from another ethnic group prior to the first round of the Sustained Dialogue project in 2013.[11] This suggests that youth are divided along the

same lines as other categories of the population, rather than demonstrating that youth would engage more in negative social patterns as the stereotype of 'youth as perpetrators of violence' would suggest.

As opposed to a simplified vision of youth as a homogeneous group, Sustained Dialogue inherently recognises and embraces their diversity and complexity throughout the process. Sustained Dialogue is built on and takes into consideration, from the initial selection stage and throughout the process, the fact that youth perceive themselves as divided along similar lines as the rest of the society. Across projects, the initial selection of young women and men is based on a set of criteria, including ethnic/clan identity, religious identity, geographic background, level of education, migratory status, gender and socio-economic background, which aim to guarantee the reflection of the existing diversity on the ground. For instance, Sustained Dialogue processes in Sudan have involved dialogue participants representing no less than 32 different ethnic groups. In other words, youth's diverse identity markers, beyond their age, are interconnected and cannot be examined separately from one another for successful peacebuilding processes working with and on youth. Young people's intersectional identities need to be acknowledged, and their inherent complexity understood and capitalised on, in order to ensure an inclusive, meaningful involvement of youth in peace and conflict processes.

This purposeful and explicit recognition of youth's diversity and inherent intersectionality throughout Sustained Dialogue processes allows participating youth to take back their agency as it recognises that they interact with – and make the most of – their environment, rather than being pawns or victims of their circumstances. While young people may count 'youth' as a component of their identity, they will also belong to a particular ethnic group, have emerged from a specific socioeconomic background, and hold a certain gender identity, in addition to the many other factors that make up an individual. Youth are, based on LPI's experience, very much aware of these aspects of their identity, and the ways in which they are able to leverage them to navigate their environments – often to the benefit of their particular ethnic/clan-based/political grouping. In this regard, Sustained Dialogue sheds light on youth's "*plusness*", a turn of phrase coined by LPI to describe youth's ability to capitalise on their accumulated identities and leverage power from that multiplicity. For instance, during the peace action stage of Sustained Dialogue, young women and men will cumulatively capitalise on their age, ethnic, religious or political identity to reach out to multiple stakeholders on campus (in Sudan and Ethiopia) or among the broader communities (in Kenya). This is amplified by the fact that Sustained Dialogue helps them think about identities as multiple. During dialogue sessions, young participants meet as individuals and not according to pre-determined "identity markers", thus broadening the concept of belonging. In other words, Sustained Dialogue affords diverse young people the space to explore, redefine and question their own multiplicity, demystify the "Other's" identities and shed light on commonalities and cross-cutting ties.

A snapshot of youth perspectives on "youth" across the Greater Horn Region

Based on extensive experience with diverse young women and men across three countries in the Horn of Africa, LPI and local partners observed that youth define themselves according to identity markers that fit them the most and that, interestingly, tend not to be youth-specific. In other words, youth do not necessarily "buy in" to the definition(s) of "youth", often formulated by non-youth/ex-youth stakeholders.

In north-eastern Kenya, young women and men engaged in Sustained Dialogue with LPI in 2016-17 define themselves as **"peace agents"**. Prior to leading dialogues and partaking in the project, baseline data had revealed that their strongest identity was either **religious or national**, rather than being age-based. Post-SD, they primarily saw themselves as peacebuilders.

In Nairobi's informal settlements, LPI observed that **societal responsibilities** are key factors in the (self) definition of the individuals. For instance, young mothers are not perceived as belonging to the youth category anymore, with their motherhood taking over their age as a definitional factor; the same does not apply to young fathers, which highlights the gendered nature of youth definitions.

In Sudan, students involved in LPI's Sustained Dialogue project on campus do not identify primarily with the youth category but rather with their **college affiliations, political affiliations, geographic areas or ethnic affiliations**.

In Ethiopia, a former Sustained Dialogue project participant recalled that, while he did not see himself as a youth, the fact that he was an unmarried man in his mid-twenties would make him a youth in his context more than due to his biological age. **Social interactions and identity markers** of age, marital status and education shaped his sense of belonging to the youth category.

Based on its experience with young women and men within and between different contexts, LPI recognizes the need to understand and engage youth as a heterogeneous category, socially situated and constructed in relation to other socio-generational groups. Such an understanding is more likely to reveal an increasingly accurate picture of how young women and men navigate their lived realities, and their multiple, complex and sometimes contradictory affiliations.

Recommendations

At the global level,

For **the United Nations (UN), in consultation with diverse young people and Member States to:**

◆ Develop a harmonised definition of youth at the global level, at least between UN agencies, UN funds and programmes for the purpose of measurement, with the caveat that it should give room for contextualisation at the local and national levels to consider the diversity in youth populations and multiplicity of identities within young individuals.

◆ Innovate an easy-to-use/intuitive intersectional analysis tool for UN agencies, funds and programmes to capture the necessary nuances for intersectional youth peace programming, adaptable to different contexts and to ensure representation and diversity across youth who are engaged in formal and informal peace processes.

At the national level,

For **Member States, relevant Ministries mandated for youth and/or security and CSOs to:**

◆ Ensure that youth-focused policies and initiatives recognise the multiplicities inherent in the youth category, by ensuring that they are based on in-depth intersectional analysis and that resultant measures address the diverse needs of young people.

At the local level,

For **formal and informal youth organizations and leaders to:**

◆ Mentor other up-and-coming youth leaders and be open for generational succession, and synergise with other youth organisations and leaders, especially across entrenched societal identity lines.

For **state and non-state, formal and informal institutions and mechanisms for conflict prevention and resolution to:**

◆ Support intra-youth dialogues to address conflictual relations between youth, and provide space for young people to build common platforms on issues that unite them, and link up/synergise with non-youth actors and civic organisations concerned about similar issues – as this will facilitate the establishment of inter-generational movements able to tackle intractable issues in ways that leverage perspectives across traditional divides.

◆ Ensure diversity of youth in conflict prevention and resolution and decision-making processes by including young women and men from centre/periphery, urban/rural, historically-marginalised, and minority groups.

2. The notion that there are 'youth issues' is misleading and unhelpful

The near-absence of young women and men in formal and informal decision-making arenas in general and in peace processes more specifically leads to simplistic interpretations and policies on/for youth's most pressing issues, expectations, aspirations, needs and interests. Youth are not recognised as critical actors (or taken seriously as positive actors, although frequently seen as 'serious threats') and, therefore, are not involved in developing what could be their own agenda/s. This has multiple implications. First, decision-making processes regarding youth tend to rely on restricted and preconceived notions of issues that are relevant to youth – or 'youth issues' . This is reflected in the ministries mandated with dealing with youth across the three countries where LPI is supporting Sustained Dialogue projects. The Sudanese and Ethiopian Ministries of Youth and Sports constitute striking examples of this tendency in the actual naming of the ministries. Similarly, national youth policies of Ethiopia (2004), Kenya (2006), and Sudan (2007) fall into similar traps – all three policies tend to be framed around conventional youth issues such as unemployment, HIV-AIDS, crime and 'deviant behaviour'. In addition, the policies adopt a limitative economic lens, for instance focusing on poverty and unemployment, without analysing the causes of these socio-economic challenges – which are structural and societal in nature, and often, a good starting point for broad-based coalitions across generational divides – instead of 'securitising' the issues (for instance, with unemployed youth seen as a threat to stability or at-risk of becoming primary drivers of violence).

Sustained Dialogue counteracts the above tendencies by providing space for young women and men to take ownership over the dialogue agenda. Indeed, youth-owned Sustained Dialogue constitutes a window of opportunity, an entry point, for the participating youth to dialogue on issues they identify, define and frame as their most pressing ones. In that sense, Sustained Dialogue contributes to refuting and deconstructing the issues traditionally associated with youth and reveals that 'youth issues' are often those that tend to affect the whole society, across generational and other divides. It also enables youth to be part of broader conversations from which they are generally excluded.

For instance, youth participating in Sustained Dialogue processes in Ethiopia and Sudan identified ethnic intolerance/divisions or 'tribalism', religious and political divisions as their most pressing issues. In Kenya, the range of issues identified by participants included issues traditionally associated with youth, such as drug abuse, unemployment, education, youth gangs, "police brutality" and profiling, as well as broader societal issues, including insecurity, negative manipulation of ethnicity, religious identity, clannism, elections and the devolution process, resource-based conflict, among others. In a way, the Sustained Dialogue experience is an example of young people's refusal to be 'distracted' by only one aspect of one's 'plusness' (referring to youth's multiple identities) – age – and instead seek out issues bigger and broader than oneself and one's core (and often imposed) identity category.

In Kenya, when asked about issues they would like their leaders to address prior to the project, dialogue participants identified tangible, individual interest-based and handout-focused issues, such as scholarships and bursaries. Towards the end of their seven-month long involvement in Sustained Dialogue, they mentioned broader societal issues, such as insecurity, corruption or access to devolved funds, thus revealing an evolution in their agenda and an increased confidence in their ability to influence change at a broader scale.[12] In the words of a former Sustained Dialogue participant from Addis Ababa University, the Sustained Dialogue project constituted an opportunity to contribute to *"something bigger"* and as such the process instils the participating youth with a sense of self-esteem and confidence in their abilities of **being and becoming peacebuilders** and actors of positive change.

Through Sustained Dialogue, LPI has learnt that young people can engage in – and appreciate – long-term, in-depth transformative processes and not just be involved in 'traditional' youth programming revolving around entertainment, creative/artistic expression and sports. Nevertheless, LPI has also seen that young people seem to have entry points to the peace agenda that other generations may not have *per se*, for instance through cross-cutting youth sub-cultures which are more prevalent in younger generations where diverse youth communicate, exchange ideas and innovations across otherwise entrenched societal identity lines. While young women and men engaged in Sustained Dialogue projects designed a wide array of peace actions seen as inter-generational, including peace marches across Nairobi's urban informal settlements and the establishment of Peace Centres in Sudan, they also designed activities typically seen as more 'youth-specific and youth-friendly', such as art exhibitions, sports tournament and street dances that they saw as an effective vector to reach out to young segments of their broader communities. These examples could also be understood as a tendency among young women and men to perpetuate what they see as society's (including INGOs and funding partners) expectations of them. Yet, while these avenues for peace are powerful and should not be discounted, youth participation should not be restricted to these domains. LPI and local partners posit that the diversity and range of peace actions designed by young men and women tend instead to reveal their ability to envision unique and innovative entry points to engage in peacebuilding and to reach out to diverse groups, across age boundaries and identity markers.

Recommendations

At the global level,

For the UN to,

◆ Build on the consultative process of the Sustainable Development Goals and continue to mobilise young people to promote and innovate Agenda 2030, particularly the 60 indicators (out of a total of 230) that pertain to youth development as a way to expand the space for diverse youth to work toward the multi-faceted goals and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.

◆ Invite diverse youth into higher-level UN processes involving key decision-makers, both as a part of the UNSCR 2250 follow-up and in discussion of broader issues of global peace and security, for instance through the 'Arria Formula'[13] within the UN Security Council.

At the national level,

For Member States, in consultation and in partnership with other non-state actors to:

◆ Build on existing (or establish) national platforms to initiate national-level broad-based consultations that create space for young women and men of diverse backgrounds to directly participate in high-level discussions, including Track I peace processes, as youth are often on the frontlines of violent conflicts. This may require setting quantitative and qualitative targets for quality and level of participation of young women and men in institutions and mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflict.

◆ In contexts where peace is fragile and latent tensions remain and hold the potential to erupt, or re-erupt, into violence, support visioning exercises for young people to dialogue around multiple visions of positive peace in their societies and from the commonalities, shape a shared vision to work collaboratively towards through sustained, rather than one-off, engagement.

◆ Provide funds specifically oriented towards allowing diverse youth to scale up innovative, effective and sustainable forms of engagement in building peace and security, and ensure that there is a thriving, healthy ecosystem of diverse platforms, organisations and spaces to engage different youth constituencies, promoting multiple forms of engagements for peace (including art, sports, and other creative pursuits, in addition to creating entry points for youth input into long-term political, governance and development processes).

At the local level,

For civil society organisations, local authorities, educational institutions, youth-focused and/or youth-led think tanks to:

◆ Provide funds for local initiatives that aim to enhance the skills of diverse youth to engage in policy-making processes, focusing on existing but under-supported youth groups.

◆ Promote conversations and awareness-raising activities among local and national government authorities on why young women and men should be included throughout iterative peace processes, namely through the policy cycle, from inception and agenda definition to operationalisation, monitoring, learning and conclusion/evaluation, in a conflict-sensitive way.

For state and non-state, formal and informal institutions and mechanisms for conflict prevention and resolution to:

◆ Promote proactive, long-term sustained engagement for peace and security, including meaningful engagement with youth, over quick-fix one-off approaches.

◆ Create awareness of relevant peace agreements at the local level, especially among youth, to foster synergies between young people's prevention actions and the existing peace agreements and the issues and provisions therein.

3. Youth are the present as well as the future

Young women and men should be considered as important drivers and agents of change in the development of their societies, owing to the implications of the transformative and transitional times in which they are situated, across backgrounds and identity markers. Not only are they leaders now, but will invariably inherit leadership posts occupied by older adults.

While implementing Sustained Dialogue, LPI observed that young women and men on average, compared with stakeholders belonging to older generations, were keener on starting new conversations and questioning the status quo. With the risk of perpetuating stereotypes, albeit positive ones, young women and men seem to show a higher degree of openness, and open-mindedness, compared with older generations, which fosters a conducive environment for their involvement in peace processes across identity boundaries. In that sense, young people are important role models and leaders for breaking new ground, not only for their peers but for children as well as older generations, able to set trends for healthier relational patterns across divides rather than perpetuating inherited ones. LPI has received testimonies from Ethiopian Sustained Dialogue students who, after a year in dialogue with other young people from diverse backgrounds, go back to their homes during longer breaks as changed individuals, due to their dialogue experience, and challenge their families and communities' long-held biases against the perceived "other". In other words, when youth take the leadership in deconstructing and reversing long-standing negative socialisation patterns between groups, a symbolic importance – a 'signification' effect – may lead to multiplier effects within society.

Based on Sustained Dialogue projects in universities in Ethiopia and Sudan, LPI and local partners observed that young students are esteemed in their communities, as they are seen as educated and on the verge of becoming the country's future leaders, in the broad sense of the term, and thus conferred (informal) present leadership status. This position tends to strengthen their "legitimacy" at the community level and can be leveraged to influence positive change. While LPI and local partners do not want to propagate an instrumentalist approach of youth as "assets" or "tools for change", this factor is important in understanding their unique position in the society.

In urban settlements, the aspect of peer-to-peer leadership and support has been identified as critical for unlocking young people's present leadership; young people are particularly leaders for other young people. The assumption that young people listen to and follow other young people's leadership and example – in essence, 'positive peer pressure' – has largely proven to be accurate, as witnessed in Sustained Dialogue projects.

Nonetheless, when youth have fully stepped up and acted on their agency, it has often been seen by authorities and other elites as threatening, and many youth policies have thus tended to be reactive to youth movements, instead of being proactively adopted to foster positive change for young women and men. This reactive nature demonstrates a lack of urgency in proactive decision-making related to youth – often making it 'too little, too late' – and especially detrimental in relation to a social category that is transitional, and often symbolises 'the Moment' in a fast-paced world, as a youth leader from Kibera, Nairobi puts it.

Recommendations

At the global level,

For the UN and its Member States to:

◆ Facilitate and accelerate Member States' progress to develop, institutionalise and operationalise inclusive youth-owned National Action Plans on UNSCR 2250, including through consultative processes with youth non-state actors, in order to implement the Progress Study's recommendations across pillars and levels. These processes should seek to learn from the challenges faced by states developing NAPs for UNSCR 1325 on Gender, Peace and Security, in particular around contextualising the Resolution to specific country contexts and with operationalisation plans and funding integrated.

At the national level,

For Member States, relevant Ministries mandated for youth and/or security and civil society, including youth umbrella organisations to:

◆ Develop proactive, forward-looking youth policies that seek to seize upon and catalyse young people's present, positive leadership for peace rather than seeking to contain them.

◆ Protect/uphold young people's universal (and often, constitutional) human rights to meaningfully participate in public affairs in their respective contexts.

For organised and informal youth actors to collaboratively:

◆ Make visible young men and women's leadership, systematically and strategically document, demonstrate, and share best practices and outcomes of initiatives/positive contribution of youth to peace processes, and foster dissemination channels to authorities at the local and national levels.

At the local level,

For state and non-state, formal and informal institutions and mechanisms for conflict prevention and resolution to:

◆ Encourage and support youth-owned, youth-led peace processes rather than 'youth-targeted/focused/friendly' programming, as a means to not undermine young people's agency to act and contribute now as leaders.

Stereotypes – A 'red thread' throughout Insights 1-3

A red thread underpinning the difficulties for young people to engage in peace processes lies in the stereotypes around youth and how societies understand them. As an example, the "youth bulge-violence" nexus conflates a surging male youth population with violence and insecurity, thus oversimplifying other variables and building on stereotypes about youth as inherently 'dangerous subjects' with a higher propensity for violence than any other population category. The Horn of Africa is no exception with international and national, state and non-state stakeholders having the tendency to view youth as a problem, and to reduce them and their actions to a simplified construct as either 'perpetrators', 'vulnerable' and/or 'victims'. While youth are often economically vulnerable, and targets of political co-option, this stereotype-based oversimplification is grounded in a supposed high degree of receptivity to messages and narratives, among young men, and to a lesser extent, young women.[14]

Structural, social, political, and economic exclusions contribute to reinforcing prevailing negative stereotypes about youth, which, themselves, nurture narratives and practices of exclusion. In other words, stereotyping is both a cause and a result of youth socio-political and socio-economic exclusion. In LPI's observations, negative stereotyping of youth seems to be fuelled, exploited and relayed at all levels of the society, from grassroots-level community members to decision-makers at the local and national levels.

Entrenched negative stereotypes about youth constitute a key obstacle to their meaningful inclusion in decision-making processes, including in peace processes. On the one hand, these stereotypes can be mobilised to restrict the access of youth to the decision-making spheres; on the other hand, these stereotypes contribute to shaping the policies and actions on/for youth, in a way that does not consider their inherent complexity and diversity. Finally, these stereotypes and structural exclusion contribute to preventing youth from enhancing their confidence in their own capacities as change agents and actors of the society in their own right.

4. Youth need an enabling environment

An enabling environment for civil society is one of the fundamental pre-requisites for meaningful engagement – be it for youth or otherwise. In two of the three contexts in which LPI has implemented Sustained Dialogue, civil society is substantially restricted, which makes engagement in political and peace processes highly challenging, even for experienced activists and civil society actors.

Shrinking space disproportionately affects groups who are already far away from decision-making centres and experience high barriers to enter public or civic arenas – youth being one such segment of society. Youth's 'legitimate' space to engage

and voice their needs and aspirations is therefore limited, triggering the need to accompany diverse youth in developing their alternative civic spaces, be they virtual, or physical.

One of the lessons from Sustained Dialogue has precisely been that young people are particularly apt at finding and creating new spaces as they are often less entrenched or beholden to the status quo, to the 'way things have always been done' and as such open up new imaginations and possibilities.

Beyond the mere existence of civic space, the quality and nature of the space is critical for young people to exercise their leadership in peace work. In 'small' civil society spaces in particular, LPI has witnessed that the creation of 'safe' space is all the more critical for young people to even consider engaging in what otherwise is understood as inherently politically sensitive and dangerous areas. In Sustained Dialogue, the participants often share that dialogue sessions are alternative safe spaces for engagement where they can articulate their respective perceptions and experiences, analyse issues and develop their agenda for change. As dialogue sessions are held in a sustained manner, they constitute safe spaces against this increasing uncertainty, 'waithood' and rapid social change; and they fuel a sense of belonging to a 'new family' working towards positive change. Young women and men involved in the dialogues have the safety and time to reflect on who they are, where they belong, and what kind of peaceful future they want to shape.

It is thus critical for actors (primarily governments) to facilitate safe space by providing a conducive enabling environment and striving to avoid co-opting strong youth initiatives. Co-option, even for formal authorities, is often counterproductive as it makes the initiatives less credible and attractive for young people, and thus less effective as peacebuilding measures.

It is not only governments who should take heed on how they engage with young people. At times, efforts to support young people's engagement and leadership through international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) or donors can be quite restrictive and restraining to the idea of alternative space, as INGOs often have their own stringent requirements, models, ideas for how and what young people should engage on – thus reducing the autonomy, flexibility and ownership of youth spaces.

Recommendations

At the global level,

For UN, International Community, Member States, relevant and diverse youth networks and umbrella organizations to:

◆ Concretely promote a space for more experience-sharing; strengthen, synergise and support network-formation to promote exchanges between youth, particularly those in 'small spaces'/conflict-affected/post-conflict settings, to enhance their knowledge on alternative approaches and increase their confidence, as a way to start addressing intra-youth divisions and provide them with needed resources.

For INGOs and international funding partners to respectively:

◆ Prioritise thorough organisational capacity assessments when working with youth organisations/groups, and subsequently focus on tailored strengthening of institutional skills and consistent accompaniment as part of a long-term process of improving the sustainability of youth-led efforts within civil society.

◆ Work towards instituting flexible funding support for small-scale local youth groups that may have reduced administrative and financial management skills, but bring alternative ideas outside universally accepted models within the peacebuilding sector. These grants may, in parallel with reduced accountability, be relatively small.

At the national level,

For Member States to:

◆ Produce or revise legislation – historically including NGO laws, civil society legislation, restrictive media laws and anti-terror legislation, among others – that would allow autonomous spaces to emerge and/or support the creation of autonomous spaces for diverse young persons to articulate their peace and security issues and design their solutions.

◆ Facilitate financial, organisational and technical support to local organisations, in particular youth organisations, through local youth-focused funding streams that are based on specific requirements that are within the ability of particularly marginalised and geographically/infrastructurally-disconnected youth to seek and manage, while enhancing their capacities to enable them to comply, in the near future, with more demanding donor requirements.

◆ Facilitate the operationalisation of youth actions by promoting a conducive environment for youth associations, for instance through making easier and more accessible registration for youth organisations while also allowing for informal youth associations and assemblies to gather within confines of the law.

At the local level,

For organised and informal youth actors:

◆ To jointly articulate and advocate for the type of enabling environment that would allow for meaningful inclusion of diverse youth in the public sphere in general and in peace processes in particular.

Endnotes

1   For more information, see: "UNSCR 2250: Introduction," youth4peace.info, accessed 16 September, 2017. https://www.youth4peace.info/UNSCR2250/Introduction.

2   See: "The Constitution of Kenya, 2010," accessed 16 September, 2017. http://www.icla.up.ac.za/images/constitutions/kenya_constitution.pdf; and: "Sudan Population and Housing Census 2008," accessed 16 September, 2017. http://catalog.ihsn.org/index.php/catalog/4216; and: "Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia – National Youth Policy 2004," accessed 16 September 2017. http://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Ethiopia_2004_National_Youth_Policy.pdf.

3   Alcinda Honwana, "Youth, Waithood and Protest Movements in Africa," *International African Institute*, January 2013.

4   World Bank. 2016. 'Kenya Country Economic Memorandum. From Economic Growth to Jobs and Shared Prosperity'.

5   Morten Bøås. 2007. 'Marginalized Youth' in **African Guerrillas: Raging Against The Machine**. Morten Bøås and Kevin C. Dunn (Eds.). Lynne Rienner Publishers: Boulder. Jon Abbink. 2005. 'Being Young in Africa: The politics of despair and renewal' in **Vanguard or Vandals: Youth, Politics and Conflict in Africa**. Jon Abbink & Ineke van Kessel (eds.). Brill: Leiden.

6   IKV PAX CHRISTI & SOPA International. 2009. 'A Practical Experience of a Peace-building Program Targeting Pastoralist Youth: Cross-Border Peace & Sports Programme for Youth Warriors Sudan/Uganda/Kenya.' Kotido Peace Initiative. See also; CEWARN-IGAD. 2010. 'Report of the Ethio-Kenya Cross-Border Peace Sports Tournament-8th-11th April'.

7   A case in point is the 2015 South Sudan peace agreement and its provisions regarding youth. The agreement creates institutions that provide space for women and youth representatives such as the 'Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Committee' and also a 'Youth Enterprise Development Fund'. For the full text of the agreement; http://www.sudantribune.com/IMG/pdf/final_proposed_compromise_agreement_for_south_sudan_conflict.pdf.

8   Harold Saunders, *Sustained Dialogue in Conflicts: Transformation and Change* (Palgrave Macmillan US: 2011).

9   Isak Svensson, Karen Brounéus, "Dialogue and Interethnic Trust: A Randomized Field Trial of 'Sustained Dialogue' in Ethiopia," *Journal of Peace Research*, August 2013, 50: 563.

10 To learn more about Biniam Gorfu's story, see: http://life-peace.org/6-years-of-dispelling-stereotypes-and-promoting-dialogue-on-ethiopian-universities, accessed on 28 September 2017.

11 This data was extracted from LPI Sudan Programme's 2015 Sustained Dialogue Project Baseline Study.

12 This observation is one of the key findings of an endline study undertaken by LPI at the end of the first round of its Sustained Dialogue project "Tubonge Mtaani" in 2016 in Nairobi's informal settlements. Data was compared with and analysed against the findings of the project's baseline study developed seven months earlier.

13 The 'Arria Formula' promotes informal, confidential gatherings which enable Security Council members to have a frank and private exchange of views, within a flexible procedural framework, with persons whom the inviting member or members of the Council (who also act as the facilitators or convenors) believe it would be beneficial to hear and/or to whom they may wish to convey a message.

14 While LPI is not focusing this submission on experience and practice in Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE), it is worth mentioning here that the P/CVE framework is also grounded on this same rationale of youth's supposed higher receptivity to narratives and messages, be they negative or positive/alternative.

Life & Peace Institute

The Life & Peace Institute (LPI) is an international centre based in Uppsala, Sweden, that supports and promotes nonviolent approaches to conflict transformation through a combination of research and action.

The main focus of LPI's programmes has been on Africa, with LPI's Horn of Africa work being established and well-known since the early 1990s. LPI is currently engaged in Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Kenya and Ethiopia, as well as engaged in policy discourse through a Horn of Africa Regional Programme. For its regional and continental policy work, the Institute is working closely with the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development. The work of LPI is carried out mainly through engagement with and support of civil society organisations and academic institutions, building strategic partnerships with local, national, regional and international organisations and networks in order to foster environments and platforms conducive transforming the drivers of violent conflict towards sustainable peace. The Sustained Dialogue engagement, supported by LPI, has been spearheaded by its long-standing partner in Ethiopia, the Peace and Development Centre, and its other partners in Kenya and Sudan, and is a testimony to the power of what collaborative partnerships for peace, across continents, can produce.

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