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Youth at the crossroads: balancing contributions to conflict and peace amid high unemployment in Africa

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Over 60% of young people in Africa are unemployed, creating a serious youth unemployment issue that exacerbates instability and limits peacebuilding chances. The variables that either encourage youth to use violence or allow them to make positive contributions to society are the primary purpose of this study, which examines the dual role of unemployed youth as agents of peace and conflict. The research uses a content analysis technique that includes case studies and policy analysis to identify the main factors contributing to youth involvement in conflict, including social exclusion, political marginalization, and economic deprivation. On the other hand, youngsters are empowered as peacebuilders through focused peacebuilding initiatives, inclusive governance, and access to high-quality employment. The findings highlight the necessity of comprehensive measures addressing systemic injustices, encouraging respectable employment, and engaging youth in politics. Policymakers may turn this demographic dilemma into a chance for long-term peace and development by utilizing the potential of Africa's youth through calculated investments in inclusion, work, and education.

KEYWORDS

youth unemployment, peacebuilding, conflict prevention, Africa, radicalization, governance inclusion, social cohesion

1 Introduction

With more than 60% of its population under 25, Africa has the youngest population in the world ([African Development Bank, 2024](#)). Although this population boom has great promise, it has also made the continent more vulnerable to a growing young unemployment issue. About 121 million African youths between the ages of 15 and 35 are either unemployed or categorized as “not in education, employment, or training (NEETs)” as of 2025 ([Owino, 2025](#)). Regional differences in the unemployment rate are notable; Southern Africa has the highest rate at 53%, followed by North Africa at 30%. In contrast, East Africa reported relatively lower rates at 6% ([Leaders of Africa, 2019](#)).

African youth's involvement in conflict and peacebuilding can be understood through the Youth Bulge hypothesis, which posits that large youth populations, when coupled with high unemployment, increase the risk of political instability and violence ([Urdal, 2006](#)). At the same time, these demographic dynamics create opportunities for youth-led peacebuilding, as documented by the [African Development Bank \(2018\)](#) and explained through Social Identity Theory, highlighting the importance of group identity in mobilization for positive and negative outcomes. This discrepancy draws attention to the

intricate socioeconomic and political elements affecting young people's career prospects throughout the continent. The labor market cannot accommodate the millions of young people who enter it each year, despite initiatives to solve this issue, such as funding youth businesses and encouraging technical education (African Development Bank, 2024). Unemployment among African youth produces a double effect, igniting conflict and providing peacebuilding opportunities. Youth who experience high unemployment rates are more susceptible to being recruited by criminal networks, political opportunists, and extremist organizations (The Diplomatic Insight, 2025). However, youth can support stability and development when actively involved in peacebuilding and employment programs (IGAD, 2025). This paradox emphasizes how critical it is to remove the systemic obstacles that drive young people to use violence while creating opportunities for them to participate positively in society. This study seeks to:

1. To identify the political and socioeconomic elements influencing young people's engagement in conflict.
2. To examine how focused interventions might equip jobless youngsters to be peacemakers.

Young unemployment must be addressed to ensure lasting peace and development throughout Africa. Policymakers may create comprehensive plans that reduce violence and unleash Africa's demographic dividend by comprehending the causes of conflict and utilizing the youth's capacity to promote peace. By offering evidence-based perspectives on how inclusive government and job development may turn Africa's youth from a source of vulnerability into a force for good, this study adds to the conversation.

2 Background

High youth unemployment rates are widely recognized as a catalyst for instability and conflict in Africa, consistent with the Relative Deprivation Theory (Gurr, 1970), which suggests that perceived disparities between expectations and actual living conditions can drive individuals toward collective action, including participation in conflict. Empirical studies (African Development Bank, 2018; Urdal, 2006) further support the link between youth unemployment and increased vulnerability to recruitment by armed groups. Africa's youth population structure presents both benefits and difficulties. On the one hand, a young population presents the possibility of innovation and economic growth—a phenomenon known as the “demographic dividend.” However, this demographic reality can worsen instability and conflict when combined with high unemployment rates and socioeconomic disparities. With rates around 30% in several nations, especially in vulnerable areas like the Sahel, Great Lakes, and the Horn of Africa, youth unemployment is a serious problem in Africa (ILO, 2016). This issue is made worse by the misalignment of educational systems with the demands of the labor market, which leaves millions of young people unemployed or underemployed.

Youth unemployment has serious repercussions. Young people are frequently pushed toward destructive coping strategies, such as engaging in violent extremism or criminal activity, by economic

hardship and a lack of possibilities. Armed organizations take advantage of these weaknesses by providing jobless adolescents with financial incentives and a feeling of community (Mbukop, 2025). For instance, terrorist groups like Boko Haram have enlisted young people in Cameroon and the Sahel by promising them social mobility and economic freedom. These relationships demonstrate how unemployment both fuels violence and impedes efforts at peacebuilding. Despite these obstacles, African youth have demonstrated incredible fortitude by actively participating in peacebuilding projects. High youth unemployment rates are widely recognized as a catalyst for instability and conflict in Africa, consistent with the Relative Deprivation Theory (Gurr, 1970), which suggests that perceived disparities between expectations and actual living conditions can drive individuals toward collective action, including participation in conflict. Empirical studies (African Development Bank, 2018; Urdal, 2006) further support the link between youth unemployment and increased vulnerability to recruitment by armed groups.

In post-conflict environments, youth-led grassroots initiatives have facilitated discourse, fostered reconciliation, and reestablished social cohesiveness (ReliefWeb, 2025). Employment-focused initiatives have also enabled young people without jobs to contribute to their communities' economies and reduce their frustrations. For example, vocational training programs and business projects have given young people employable skills that allow them to establish long-term incomes. However, tackling young unemployment needs more than just discrete measures. It is necessary to address structural obstacles, including poor governance, political marginalization, and systematic injustices, to foster an atmosphere supporting young empowerment. To turn Africa's young people into a force for stability and prosperity, holistic approaches that combine peacebuilding tactics with economic development are crucial.

3 Theoretical framework and application

Conflict theory, peacebuilding theory, and youth bulge theory are all incorporated into the study's theoretical framework to examine the multiple roles African youth play in the face of excessive unemployment. These ideas shed light on the socioeconomic and institutional elements influencing young people's engagement in conflict and their potential contributions to peacekeeping.

3.1 Conflict theory

According to conflict theory, which has its roots in Marxist viewpoints, social and economic disparities are the leading causes of conflict. Youth unemployment in Africa exacerbates economic marginalization and suffering, leading to grievances that incite youth violence. Armed gangs take advantage of these weaknesses by providing cash rewards and a feeling of community, which attracts young people without jobs to join (Mbukop, 2025). In areas like the Sahel, where structural poverty and marginalization encourage recruitment into extremist groups like Boko Haram, this argument

is especially relevant. The socioeconomic frustrations that motivate young people to engage in violence are explained by conflict theory. For instance, political elites used unemployed young people as intimidation tools during Kenya's post-election violence. In addition to economic interventions, structural improvements that advance equity and inclusion are necessary to address these complaints.

3.2 Peacebuilding theory

In order to promote reconciliation, social cohesion, and inclusive government, peacebuilding theory highlights the significance of tackling the underlying causes of conflict. It draws attention to the transformative power of giving underprivileged groups—like young people without jobs—the ability to actively engage in peace processes. In order to ease tensions and foster trust amongst parties involved in a conflict, peacebuilding initiatives frequently concentrate on establishing forums for communication, community involvement, and socioeconomic advancement (ACCORD, 2024). Youth-led programs can foster community cohesiveness and healing, according to peacebuilding theory. Liberia's grassroots movements, for example, have shown how youth may spearhead initiatives to restore trust through interfaith discussions and volunteer work. By incorporating peacebuilding goals into employment initiatives, it is ensured that economic empowerment directly supports stability.

3.3 Youth bulge theory

According to the youth bulge theory, if economic opportunities are scarce, cultures with disproportionately large youth populations are more likely to face instability (Urdal, 2004). With over 60% of its population under 25, Africa's demographic reality offers opportunities and problems. Young people become frustrated when labor markets are unable to accommodate this expanding workforce, which makes them more vulnerable to being recruited by armed organizations or engaging in criminal activity. Critics of the youth bulge idea contend that it ignores young people's capacity to be peacemakers when given significant opportunities to engage in economic and governmental processes (Heinsohn, 2008).

The youth bulge theory contextualizes the demographic issues influencing African youth dynamics. For instance, Zimbabwe's youth empowerment initiatives have demonstrated how focused interventions can use young people's enthusiasm and inventiveness for peacebuilding instead of conflict.

3.4 Integration of theories

Together, these three theories offer a thorough framework for comprehending the dual roles that African youth play in the face of high unemployment: youth bulge theory contextualizes demographic realities that influence these dynamics; peacebuilding theory outlines strategies for converting marginalized youth into agents of stability; and conflict theory explains structural factors

that push youth toward violence. By combining these theories, this study highlights how crucial it is to address socioeconomic issues like unemployment and structural obstacles like poor governance to maximize African youth's potential as agents of lasting peace.

To frame this study, the Youth Bulge hypothesis (Urdal, 2006), the Relative Deprivation Theory (Gurr, 1970), and the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) are employed. These frameworks collectively explain how demographic pressures, socioeconomic grievances, and group identity dynamics influence youth participation in conflict and peacebuilding. This theoretical grounding provides a structured lens for analyzing the dual roles of youth in African societies and guides the interpretation of empirical findings throughout the manuscript.

4 Literature review

4.1 Youth and conflict—outside Africa

Conflict is not exclusively caused by youth unemployment in Africa; other regions, including the Middle East, South Asia, and Latin America, have seen comparable trends. Research shows that young people are frequently pushed into violence or membership in extremist groups when economic hardship and political marginalization coexist. For example, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have some of the worst youth unemployment rates globally, and hostilities worsen labor market difficulties. Prior to the current crisis, youth unemployment in Gaza was 59.3%, with rates among young women reaching 86.7% (International Alert, 2016). These instances highlight how crucial it is to address systemic injustices and socioeconomic grievances in order to keep young people out of violence. The absence of opportunities has fueled instability and violence by providing a fertile field for grievances (Health & Safety International, 2024). Ethnic conflicts and past uprisings have been connected to youth unemployment in Sri Lanka. Dissatisfied with unmet expectations and political manipulation, Sinhala youth in the southern parts of the country became involved in violent uprisings. Because the structural hurdles that keep young people out of the political and economic spheres are not well-understood, attempts to solve these concerns through employment programs have frequently failed. Although Colombia and El Salvador are highlighted in detail, similar patterns of youth engagement in violence and peacebuilding are observed in Honduras, Guatemala, Uruguay, and Brazil, as shown by recent research and regional initiatives.

Across Central America, particularly in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, youth violence and social exclusion have become deeply entrenched issues. These countries, collectively known as the "Northern Triangle," consistently rank among the most violent in the world, with youth often both victims and perpetrators of violence (Williams, 2016; Umaña and Rossini, 2012). The proliferation of gangs—driven by factors such as high unemployment, weak judicial systems, and pervasive social exclusion—has created environments where young people face daily threats to their safety and limited opportunities for positive engagement (Williams, 2016; Umaña and Rossini, 2012; Interpeace, 2018). In many neighborhoods, gangs have evolved into influential organizations, sometimes filling the void left by inadequate state

services, but more often perpetuating cycles of violence and marginalization (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024; Interpeace, 2018). Government responses have primarily focused on punitive “mano dura” (iron fist) policies, which, rather than curbing gang activity, have often led to further organization and entrenchment of these groups, exacerbating the exclusion and vulnerability of youth populations (Correa and Maynard, 2017; Umaña and Rossini, 2012).

Youth violence and social exclusion are deeply rooted challenges in Central America, particularly in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. In these countries, the proliferation of gangs—such as MS-13 and Barrio 18—has been driven by a combination of poverty, lack of economic opportunities, and weak governance. Many young people, facing marginalization and limited prospects for education or employment, are drawn into gangs as a means of survival, protection, and social belonging (Dammert, 2017). The territorial control exerted by gangs fosters environments of fear and instability, further eroding trust in public institutions and perpetuating cycles of violence and exclusion (KIND, 2023; Berkman, 2007). Social exclusion and marginalization make youth more vulnerable to recruitment and reinforce their sense of disconnection from mainstream society, deepening the crisis (Dammert, 2017; Berkman, 2007).

Despite these adversities, youth across Latin America have become active agents in peacebuilding and political activism. In Colombia, initiatives such as the Peace Corridors program—supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)—have empowered young people, particularly from conflict-affected and marginalized communities, to engage in political advocacy, conflict resolution, and community leadership (UNDP, 2024). These programs provide training in public management, strategic communication, and rights promotion, equipping youth with the skills needed to address interethnic conflicts and contribute to reconciliation at both local and national levels. In Uruguay, platforms like “Dialogar Acerca” and the reactivated Interparty Youth (Juventud Interpartidaria) have created spaces for young people from diverse political backgrounds to collaborate, build consensus, and influence the national agenda (UNDP, 2024). These initiatives have resulted in the drafting of collective policy proposals and a renewed emphasis on informed, inclusive debate within Uruguay’s democratic institutions, demonstrating the potential for youth to drive positive political change (UNDP, 2024).

At the regional level, movements such as “Tejiendo Redes Infancia” (Weaving Childhood Networks) advance youth participation in policy and advocacy across 20 Latin American countries. This coalition brings together civil society organizations to defend and promote the rights of children and adolescents, fostering intergenerational dialogue, building advocacy coalitions, and leveraging digital platforms to enable direct youth participation in social change. The movement’s reach and impact underscore the capacity of youth to challenge entrenched social structures and advocate for their rights at local, national, and international levels. While the initial analysis focused on specific case studies such as Colombia and El Salvador, it is important to recognize that youth violence, exclusion, and activism are present throughout Latin America, though with varying characteristics and intensity. From the gang-dominated neighborhoods of the Northern Triangle

to the consensus-driven youth dialogues in Uruguay, young people across the region are confronting significant challenges and driving innovative responses. This diversity highlights the need for context-sensitive approaches that acknowledge the shared risks facing Latin American youth and their collective potential to shape more peaceful and inclusive societies (Dammert, 2017; Berkman, 2007).

4.2 Youth and peacebuilding

Young people worldwide have shown that they can promote peace when given the chance to participate in meaningful activities. By combining business training with peacebuilding efforts, programs like El Salvador’s “Comprehensive Initiatives to Prevent Violence” have effectively empowered at-risk adolescents in Latin America. By offering alternatives to joining a gang, these programs promote social cohesion and give young people the skills they need to work for themselves. Participants report feeling more connected and having higher self-esteem, which lessens their susceptibility to violence (Interpeace, 2024). Since the 1996 Peace Accords were signed, adolescents in Guatemala have been crucial in post-conflict peacebuilding initiatives. Through UNDP-led programs, young leaders have received conflict resolution, mediation, and conversation facilitation training. These programs have empowered young people to be change agents in their communities and bolstered democratic government at the grassroots level (UNV, 2025). Similarly, the “Peace Corridors” program in Colombia’s northern Cauca region has trained young representatives from several ethnic groups in conflict transformation and political advocacy, promoting interethnic communication and lowering tensions (UNDP Latin America, 2024). Youth-led peacebuilding projects in Asia-Pacific nations like Indonesia and Timor-Leste have emphasized fostering interethnic harmony via interactive workshops and cross-cultural interactions. As well as promoting respect amongst various groups, ASEAN-IPR-supported programs have improved young people’s negotiation and conflict analysis abilities (ASEAN-IPR Training Report, 2024). These initiatives demonstrate how involving young people in peace processes can have a transformative effect.

4.3 Unemployment and youth participation in violence

Many people believe that youth unemployment is a significant cause of violence, especially in vulnerable areas like the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, and the Great Lakes. Many young people are disenfranchised due to a lack of economic possibilities, making them susceptible to joining armed conflicts or being recruited by extremist organizations. Extremist groups like Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab, for example, take advantage of the high unemployment rate in the Sahel region to recruit young people by providing them with financial incentives, a feeling of purpose, and a sense of belonging (UNDP, 2017; UNODC, 2024). According to United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) research, 25% of voluntary recruits stated

that their primary motivation for joining extremist groups was unemployment, with many others citing violations of human rights as a trigger (UNDP, 2017). Because of decades of bloodshed, armed groups such as the M23 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in Uganda often target jobless youth in the Great Lakes region. By exploiting socioeconomic vulnerabilities to grow their membership, these groups contribute to violent cycles (ACLED, 2025). Similarly, Al-Shabaab has recruited young people by exploiting the structural unemployment and weak government in the Horn of Africa (Global Centre on Cooperative Security, 2016). However, several studies argue that while unemployment contributes, it is typically not the primary cause. Political grievances, corruption, and exposure to violence often directly impact youth's decision to participate in conflict (GSDRC, 2016).

4.4 Case studies from conflict-prone regions

4.4.1 Sahel region

Over the past 10 years, there has been a sharp rise in violent episodes in the Sahel. Between 2015 and 2023, attacks on civilians increased 28-fold in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger alone. Young people without jobs have been disproportionately impacted, and many of them have joined extremist organizations as a result of their lack of options and economic hardship (UNICEF, 2024).

4.4.2 Great lakes region

Young people are both victims and perpetrators of violence, as the Great Lakes Youth Network for Dialogue and Peace emphasizes. Due to the desperation brought on by unemployment and displacement, many young people are coerced into joining militias or resorting to violence (DandC.eu, 2024).

4.4.3 Horn of Africa

Al-Shabaab has recruited young people into its ranks by taking advantage of unemployment in Somalia and the surrounding nations. The organization provides social recognition and financial support for disenfranchised people with no other realistic survival or growth options (Global Centre on Cooperative Security, 2016).

4.5 Complexities beyond unemployment

Although it is a significant contributing factor, unemployment is not the only reason why young people engage in violence. More and more research demonstrates that additional elements—like exposure to state violence, political exclusion, discrimination, and corruption—frequently make young unemployment complaints worse. For instance, several factors, such as widespread ire at corrupt governments and inadequate governance frameworks, contributed to youth unemployment during the 2011 Arab Spring upheavals (GSDRC, 2016). According to some research, insecure work or “bad

jobs” may exacerbate complaints rather than resolve them (ILO, 2016).

4.6 Youth and peacebuilding

Initiatives for youth-led peacebuilding are becoming more widely acknowledged as essential to African conflict resolution and sustainable development. Many young people actively promote peace in their communities despite structural issues, including social exclusion, political marginalization, and unemployment. With an emphasis on their contributions to advocacy, community cohesiveness, and reconciliation, this section examines the role of youth in peacebuilding. Additionally, it looks at case studies of effective job programs that lower the likelihood of violence and draw attention to the difficulties young people face in their attempts to promote peace.

4.6.1 Youth-led peacebuilding initiatives

Young people in Africa have shown creative approaches to peacebuilding, frequently using grassroots projects to address the underlying causes of conflict. For example, Tanzania's #VijanaNaAmani255 movement inspired young people to build community resilience by tackling poverty and educational disparities that fuel violent extremism. As part of this effort, school peace clubs were established, interfaith discussions were encouraged, and young people were trained in community outreach (UNDP, 2023a). Similarly, the Great Lakes region's YouthLab program gave young people a forum to engage in group peace initiatives and conduct discussions with decision-makers (Interpeace, 2021). Initiatives organized by young people have been essential in averting election violence and fostering tolerance in the Sahel region of West Africa. Initiatives that combine vocational training and intergenerational discussions have improved understanding between people and created economic opportunities that reduce the likelihood of violence (UNFPA, 2021). These illustrations show how giving youth leadership training and establishing avenues for meaningful engagement may turn them into change agents. In 2024, Kenya witnessed unprecedented youth mobilizations and protests in response to the government's proposed Finance Bill to increase taxes on essential goods. The protests, driven mainly by digitally-savvy youth under the hashtag #RejectFinanceBill2024, forced the government to withdraw the bill and highlighted the power of youth activism in shaping national policy. These events also underscored the role of digital platforms in mobilizing collective action and the political awakening among Kenyan youth, who challenged state authority and demanded greater accountability. The protests resulted in significant political consequences, including the dismissal of several ministers and a renewed focus on youth issues in the national discourse.

4.6.2 Employment programs as peacebuilding tools

Because employment initiatives address the socioeconomic issues that frequently fuel violence, they have become a key weapon

for peacebuilding. According to research, offering respectable employment options might lessen violence and increase young resistance against recruitment by extremist organizations (ILO, 2016). For instance:

- The Kenya Youth Employment Opportunities Project (KYEOP) reduced the likelihood of conflict among young people without jobs by combining violence prevention techniques with vocational training (CHRIPS, 2025).
- South Africa's Community Work Programme (CWP): This program promoted social cohesion and provided work opportunities in the public sector to combat socioeconomic disadvantage (CHRIPS, 2025).

However, what matters most is the caliber of the jobs offered. According to studies, unstable occupations or poor pay can exacerbate complaints rather than resolve them. Long-term peacebuilding results are more likely to emerge from programs emphasizing “decent work”—jobs that offer stability, dignity, and fair remuneration (ILO, 2016; Include-Platform, 2021).

4.6.3 Challenges in youth peacebuilding

Notwithstanding their promise, young peacebuilders encounter several obstacles that reduce their efficacy:

1. Marginalization: According to Peace-Direct and UNOY (2019), many young people are marginalized because they are not included in political decision-making processes, limiting their ability to influence policies that impact their lives.
2. Funding Restrictions: According to Peace-Direct and UNOY (2019), youth-led projects frequently face financial difficulties and lack institutional backing to continue their operations.
3. Shrinking Civic Space: In certain areas, young involvement in peacebuilding initiatives is hampered by restrictive laws and restricted access to civic places (UNDP and UNFPA, 2017).
4. Gender Norms: According to Peace-Direct and UNOY (2019), gender norms might limit young women's involvement in peace processes. Hence, specific interventions are needed to encourage inclusivity.

4.7 Gaps in existing literature

4.7.1 Limited integration of conflict drivers and peacebuilding strategies

One of the most notable gaps in the body of extant work is the absence of integrated approaches that concurrently address the factors that lead to youth involvement in conflict and their potential contributions to peacebuilding. Most research concentrates on either peacebuilding or conflict prevention without examining the interactions between these factors (Include-Platform, 2021). Youth employment initiatives, for instance, are frequently deployed as peacebuilding tools, but they frequently overlook systemic injustices like social marginalization and political exclusion, which feed the resentment of young people without jobs (ILO, 2016; UNDP, 2023b). This restricted focus reduces the efficacy

of interventions and ignores the intricate relationship between sociopolitical variables and economic disadvantage.

4.7.2 Insufficient emphasis on job quality

Another significant disparity is the focus on work status rather than job caliber. More and more research indicates that unstable or subpar employment can make complaints worse rather than better (Include-Platform, 2021). For example, youth employment programs frequently fall short of delivering fair salaries, job security, and dignity—all of which are critical for long-term peacebuilding outcomes, even while their goal is to prevent violence by giving young people work opportunities (ILO, 2016). This mistake emphasizes the importance of giving “decent work” more attention as a variable in youth employment initiatives.

4.7.3 Marginalization of indigenous African peacebuilding mechanisms

Another gap in the literature is the marginalization of native African methods for resolving conflicts and promoting peace. Africa has a wealth of traditional conflict-resolution techniques, which are frequently disregarded in favor of contemporary strategies that cannot adequately consider local circumstances (ACCORD, 2025; Adibo, 2017; United States Institute of Peace, 2023). Despite being neglected in policy frameworks, indigenous interventions—such as community-based reconciliation and psychological healing practices—have demonstrated efficacy in reestablishing social cohesion and trust among youngsters impacted by violence (ACCORD, 2025).

4.7.4 Youth participation in decision-making

Even while the value of youth involvement in peace processes is becoming more widely acknowledged, young people are still routinely left out of decision-making forums. Youth frequently do not contribute significantly to policies and programs to alleviate unemployment or advance peacebuilding (ACCORD, 2025; Peace AU Study, 2020). This exclusion reduces the efficacy of programs and underutilizes the creative ideas that youth can provide to peacebuilding initiatives. For instance, initiatives such as UNSCR 2250 stress the importance of including youth in peace and security agendas, yet implementation varies throughout Africa (Peace AU Study, 2020).

4.7.5 Gender dynamics

The research also emphasizes how youth-focused peacebuilding initiatives tend to overlook gender dimensions. Due to ingrained gender conventions restricting their ability to participate in economic and peacebuilding endeavors, young women confront difficulties (Peace-Direct and UNOY, 2019). Targeted interventions that encourage inclusivity and enable young women to contribute to peace actively are necessary to overcome these obstacles.

5 Methodology

To investigate young unemployment and its dual effects on conflict and peacebuilding in several African regions, including West Africa, East Africa, and the Great Lakes region, this study uses a qualitative research design that includes content analysis and case studies. In the context of youth unemployment and peacebuilding initiatives, content analysis was especially well-suited for analyzing textual material from secondary sources, allowing for the discovery of patterns, themes, and connections (ATLAS.ti, 2024). The case study technique enhanced content analysis by offering in-depth insights into the area dynamics. It enables a more nuanced understanding of how political and socioeconomic issues impact youth behavior. The study used secondary data collection methods to analyze the data without direct participant interaction. To find patterns in youth unemployment, conflict dynamics, and peacebuilding efforts, data from credible sources, including the World Bank, the African Union (AU), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the International Labor Organization (ILO), were analyzed (ILO, 2016; UNDP, 2023d).

Peer-reviewed publications and meta-analyses offered theoretical viewpoints on the connection between young participation in war or peacebuilding and unemployment. Statistical datasets from governmental and non-governmental organizations provided quantitative information about unemployment rates and their sociopolitical effects (PMC, 2019). The effectiveness of policies about peacebuilding tactics and youth employment programs in addressing conflict drivers and fostering social cohesion was evaluated. Without speaking with participants directly, this methodology allowed for a thorough analysis of the body of research regarding the effects of youth unemployment on conflict and peacebuilding.

6 Findings and discussion

6.1 Findings

6.1.1 Drivers of Youth involvement in conflict

Youth involvement in war is influenced by several socioeconomic and political issues throughout Africa, with economic deprivation emerging as the primary motivator. High unemployment rates make young people feel vulnerable and frustrated, which makes it easier for them to join radical or armed groups. These organizations frequently take advantage of the financial despair of young people without jobs by providing financial incentives, food, and shelter otherwise unavailable in their communities. To further encourage involvement, some organizations, for example, offer loans or other financial assistance to recruits' families. In addition to economic hardship, political exploitation has a significant impact on youth involvement in war. Youth without jobs are frequently recruited as political thugs or militia members during times of political unrest, elections, or demonstrations. Power brokers and politicians use their complaints to intimidate opponents or sabotage democratic processes. This abuse erodes confidence in political systems and feeds violent cycles. The lack of access to education and skill

development is another important factor. Many young individuals encounter obstacles to receiving a good education or find that their skills do not align with their jobs. They become more vulnerable to radicalization or criminal activity as a result of this alienation, which also breeds dissatisfaction and marginalization. The legacy of violence further normalizes fighting as a feasible method of survival for disenfranchised young people in areas like the Sahel and the Great Lakes, which have a history of continuous conflict.

6.1.2 Youth contributions to peacebuilding

Despite their susceptibility to conflict, African youth have been remarkably resilient and innovative in their contributions to peacebuilding initiatives (UNDP, 2023c). Young people's grassroots efforts have significantly fostered social cohesion and reconciliation in communities impacted by violence. Youth-led peace movements, for instance, have arranged cultural festivals, interfaith discussions, and volunteer initiatives that promote mutual understanding amongst various communities. These programs frequently use local networks and expertise to address the underlying causes of conflict successfully. Employment initiatives have also been crucial in empowering young people without jobs to be peacemakers and lowering their frustrations. Technical and vocational education programs have given young people employable skills, allowing them to establish steady careers.

At-risk kids have effectively become contributors to local economies through entrepreneurship initiatives. For example, microfinance programs have given young people small loans to launch their enterprises, lowering their reliance on illegal activity or extremist organizations. Young people have also actively engaged in lobbying and policy participation to promote peace and security. Young people have gained the ability to actively participate in decision-making through leadership development seminars and awareness campaigns. Through advancing social justice and inclusive government, these initiatives have raised their voices and contested narratives of violence.

6.1.3 Difficulties in addressing youth unemployment

Although young participation in peacebuilding initiatives has advanced significantly, obstacles still stand in the way of its full potential. The restricted scalability of employment initiatives is one of the main obstacles. Due to financial limitations or a lack of institutional support, many programs are small-scale, ignoring substantial portions of young people without jobs. In addition, many young people end up in low-paying or unstable professions that do not meet their expectations because the quality of work offered through these programs frequently falls short of expectations. Systemic obstacles preventing young people from participating in politics and decision-making present another difficulty. Young people are important participants in peacebuilding initiatives, but are frequently left out by inflexible hierarchies and conservative power structures that prefer older generations. In addition to reducing the efficacy of therapies, this exclusion makes young people feel even more alienated. Additional challenges are posed by gender dynamics, especially for young women who are unable to participate in

economic and reconciliation endeavors due to deeply ingrained social conventions. Targeted interventions that address gender-specific issues and advance inclusivity are necessary to remove these obstacles.

6.2 Discussion

Consistent with [Urdal's \(2006\)](#) youth bulge hypothesis, findings affirm that high youth unemployment correlates with increased risk of conflict. However, unlike [Cramer's \(2010\)](#) argument that economic factors alone cannot explain youth mobilization, this study finds that political exclusion and lack of civic engagement opportunities are equally salient, echoing the multidimensional approach advocated by the [African Development Bank \(2018\)](#).

6.2.1 Comparative analysis of regions: unemployment leading to conflict vs. youth contributing to peace

Africa's youth unemployment situation varies widely by region, with some countries experiencing a rise in conflict and others witnessing youth-led peacebuilding efforts. In conflict-prone regions like the Sahel and the Great Lakes, unemployment often fuels socioeconomic grievances and pushes young people into violence. Armed organizations exploit young people without work by offering them financial incentives and a sense of belonging, which makes joining extreme groups an enticing alternative. For example, the high unemployment rate in the Sahel has been exploited by groups such as Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab to grow their numbers and fuel cycles of violence and instability. However, regions such as West Africa have demonstrated how to empower youth through targeted peacebuilding initiatives, lowering the probability of conflict and fostering societal cohesion.

Initiatives such as “Young Peacebuilders in West Africa” have given young people the tools to advocate, engage in discourse, and work toward reconciliation. Youth voices have been heard in governance processes, and tensions have decreased due to these efforts. Similarly, job programs emphasizing vocational training and entrepreneurship have turned at-risk youngsters into contributors to local economies, lowering their susceptibility to armed group recruitment. The disparate results highlight how crucial context-specific interventions are. Addressing systemic obstacles like poverty and exclusion is essential in areas where unemployment fuels conflict. Meanwhile, expanding effective programs and guaranteeing long-term funding can increase the effectiveness of youth-led peace initiatives.

6.2.2 Interplay between structural barriers and socio-economic factors

Inadequate education systems, political marginalization, and poor governance are structural obstacles that greatly influence how young people participate in war or peacebuilding. Poor governance frequently alienates young people because it ignores

their socioeconomic demands and excludes them from decision-making. Young people are more likely to resort to violence as a result of this isolation, which also breeds mistrust of institutions. For example, young people without jobs are frequently coerced into serving as weapons of intimidation or disturbance during political exploitation during elections or protests. These difficulties are exacerbated by socioeconomic variables such as poverty and limited access to high-quality education. Due to a lack of economic options, young people in high-dependence ratio areas—like the Sahel—are more susceptible to human trafficking or recruitment by armed groups. When their credentials do not match the demands of the labor market, even young people with education encounter obstacles that can result in underemployment or unemployment. Young people's discontent is sustained by this misalignment between educational systems and economic reality. However, young people can become effective peacebuilding agents when socioeconomic issues and structural impediments are addressed together. For instance, combining vocational training programs with local governance reforms can reduce unemployment and open doors for young people to get involved in community development. Programs that support inclusive governance, including intergenerational discussions, aid in bridging the divide between young people and policymakers by encouraging cooperation and mutual trust.

While earlier literature often framed youth primarily as sources of instability ([World Bank, 2011](#)), more recent analyses ([UNDP, 2021](#); [Mercy-Corps, 2015](#)) highlight their capacity as peacebuilders. These findings support this shift, documenting numerous youth-led initiatives contributing to local peace processes in Kenya and Nigeria. However, this study also identifies persistent structural barriers that limit the scalability of such efforts, a nuance less emphasized in the aforementioned reports.

7 Policy implications

7.1 Aligning peacebuilding strategies with employment creation efforts

Addressing the underlying causes of instability and promoting sustainable development in Africa requires coordinating peacebuilding initiatives with job creation. Because it leads to social marginalization and economic hardship, unemployment—especially among young people—is a significant cause of conflict and makes them more susceptible to being recruited by extremist organizations or engaging in criminal activity. Employment creation can be stabilized by resolving these issues and giving young people opportunities for social involvement and economic empowerment. However, how well employment initiatives are planned and carried out determines how well they contribute to peace. Programs must concentrate on good jobs that provide fair compensation, stability, and upward mobility opportunities, rather than just producing jobs.

Low-quality employment might undermine the possibility of peacebuilding by escalating grievances rather than resolving them. For example, vocational training programs that align with market

expectations can give young people the skills to find fulfilling work and lessen their vulnerability to conflict-causing factors.

Furthermore, rather than considering job development as an afterthought, peace-building efforts should incorporate it as a fundamental element. This calls for an all-encompassing strategy incorporating programs to promote social cohesion, reconciliation, and inclusive government with economic development. For instance, intergroup collaboration programs can lessen prejudices and promote trust across various communities, which promotes stability over the long run.

7.2 Multi-stakeholder collaboration in addressing youth unemployment

Governments, the commercial sector, civil society organizations (CSOs), and international development partners must all work together to address youth unemployment as a major contributor to instability. Every stakeholder has a distinct role to play in fostering an atmosphere that supports adolescent employment and peacebuilding:

7.2.1 The state

Policies that prioritize youth employment as a national security and development concern must be developed by governments. This entails investing in education and skill development that align with the demands of the labor market, putting labor reforms into place to raise the caliber of jobs, and offering incentives for creating jobs in the private sector. While addressing immediate livelihood needs, governments might also support public works initiatives that involve jobless youth in community development projects.

7.2.2 Business sector

The business sector is a vital ally in the battle against youth unemployment due to its capacity to create many work opportunities. Businesses can invest in industries with plenty of potential for growth and employment creation, such as manufacturing, technology, and agriculture. Additionally, partnerships between companies and academic institutions can help close the skills gap by ensuring that training programs meet industry standards.

7.2.3 Civil society

CSOs are critical in promoting young participation in policymaking and developing neighborhood-based projects that tackle regional issues. They can create specialized treatments that speak to the needs of young people and are frequently in a better position to comprehend community dynamics.

7.2.4 International development partners

To assist national initiatives, institutions such as the International Labor Organization (ILO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the African Union (AU) offer financial support, policy recommendations, and technical

assistance. Additionally, they provide knowledge-sharing forums where interested parties share best practices and insights from effective initiatives.

Collaboration among multiple stakeholders guarantees that youth employment programs are thorough and tailored to particular circumstances. Government-private sector collaborations, for example, can pool resources to create many jobs. By involving marginalized groups like women and young people from rural areas, CSOs simultaneously guarantee inclusivity.

8 Recommendations

8.1. Integrated approaches

Adopting integrated strategies that combine frameworks for peacebuilding with economic empowerment initiatives is crucial to addressing youth unemployment and its role in conflict and peacebuilding. While economic possibilities can effectively promote social cohesiveness and resilience, economic deprivation is a significant factor in young people's engagement in conflict. Programs should be created by policymakers to simultaneously address the underlying causes of violence, such as marginalization, poverty, and inequality, and encourage youth involvement in peacebuilding efforts. For instance, vocational training programs should include elements that promote communication, peacemaking, and community involvement and give young people employable skills. This two-pronged strategy guarantees that economic empowerment directly supports the establishment of enduring peace. To guarantee relevance and efficacy, integrated initiatives should also use local resources and expertise. Youth participation in decision-making through community-based initiatives can aid in bridging the gap between peacebuilding and economic development. Furthermore, incorporating peacebuilding goals into national employment plans helps produce a coherent framework for tackling the political and socioeconomic issues facing young people.

8.2 Focus on quality employment

Youth employment programs must focus on ensuring quality work rather than just producing jobs. To address the systemic issues that frequently cause instability, decent work initiatives prioritize fair compensation, job security, and chances for professional and personal growth. Youth who work in low-quality or unstable occupations may become even more frustrated, which increases their vulnerability to conflict dynamics. Programs should concentrate on businesses like agribusiness, digital industries, and green economies, which have much promise for creating long-term jobs. In areas like the Sahel, for example, encouraging eco-entrepreneurship or green jobs can address environmental issues and give young people meaningful work possibilities at the same time. Similarly, funding for training in digital skills can promote innovation and economic growth while preparing youth for employment in developing sectors. Governments and development partners should also prioritize coordinating educational institutions with labor market demands to lessen the

gap between skills and job possibilities. Policymakers may reduce the socioeconomic grievances that fuel conflict and increase the contributions of youth to peacebuilding by providing them with suitable skills and guaranteeing access to high-quality employment.

8.3 Youth leadership platforms

Fostering young involvement in peace and security agendas requires the institutionalization of systems for meaningful youth participation in decision-making processes. Even though they are disproportionately impacted by war and unemployment, young people are frequently left out of policy deliberations. Creating forums for youth leadership, such as regional coalitions, advisory boards, or national youth councils, can give young people organized ways to express their opinions and participate in public policy formulation. Such forums ought to promote intergenerational communication and mutual comprehension between young people and decision-makers. For instance, multi-stakeholder conferences that unite young leaders, private sector actors, civil society organizations (CSOs), and government representatives can promote cooperation on peacebuilding and job development topics. By addressing the obstacles that underprivileged groups, like young women or rural youth, encounter, youth leadership platforms should likewise prioritize inclusivity. Access to resources, leadership development programs, and mentoring opportunities can enable these groups to actively influence the policies that impact their lives.

8.4 Regional cooperation

In vulnerable areas like the Sahel or the Great Lakes, tackling cross-border issues like youth unemployment and conflict requires bolstering regional collaboration. Numerous factors that contribute to instability, including resource competitiveness, migration pressures, and violent extremism, cut across state boundaries. These issues can be lessened, and cooperation between surrounding nations can be encouraged through regional programs that support peacebuilding and employment growth. For instance, young people in border areas who are frequently left out of national development projects can benefit from cross-border vocational training programs or entrepreneurship initiatives. In addition to addressing their adolescent populations' difficulties, regional discussions on delicate topics like migration or resource sharing can help foster confidence between nations.

These efforts should be coordinated by regional organizations like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) or the African Union (AU). Governments can guarantee a unified strategy to address youth unemployment while fostering stability internationally by coordinating national policies with regional objectives. These suggestions strongly emphasize the need for comprehensive solutions that deal with the socioeconomic issues that fuel conflict and provide opportunities for young people to act as peacemakers. Policymakers can foster an environment that allows Africa's youth to flourish as contributors to stability and

sustainable development by integrating economic empowerment with peacebuilding frameworks, emphasizing decent work initiatives, institutionalizing youth leadership platforms, and bolstering regional cooperation.

9 Conclusion

With high unemployment rates, Africa's youth are at a critical juncture where they must act as peacemakers and conflict catalysts. On the one hand, many young people are left exposed to being recruited by extremist groups or exploited during political upheaval due to economic hardship and social isolation. On the other hand, kids have shown incredible endurance, creativity, and leadership in promoting social cohesion and reconciliation within their communities when given the chance to work in meaningful jobs and participate in peacebuilding projects. These opposing responsibilities emphasize the importance of addressing the socioeconomic and structural elements influencing young people's conduct.

Holistic methods are crucial to maximizing the potential of African youth as peacemakers. In order to address the underlying causes of instability and promote resilience simultaneously, peacebuilding frameworks and economic empowerment initiatives must be combined. Part of this prioritizes decent work programs that provide equitable pay and job stability while giving youth the necessary skills through educational reform and career training. In order to foster an environment where young people may flourish as contributors to sustainable development, structural hurdles like gender inequity, political exclusion, and poor governance must be addressed.

Youth must be acknowledged as key stakeholders in Africa's development agenda by policymakers, practitioners, and scholars. Governments should implement systems that allow young people to participate meaningfully in decision-making so that their opinions are heard when formulating employment and peacebuilding policies. Multi-stakeholder collaboration—bringing together governments, private-sector entities, civil society organizations, and international development partners—is essential to scale up successful interventions and ensure sustainability. The message is clear: Africa's youth are active agents who can bring about revolutionary change, not just passive receivers of programs. African countries may use the demographic dividend of their youthful populations to create a future characterized by peace, stability, and prosperity by empowering them and tackling systemic issues.

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