

From Mobilisation to Sustainable Peace? Reassessing the Peacebuilding Potential of ZANU PF Youth League Initiatives in Zimbabwe, 2008–2025

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ABSTRACT

This article reassesses the peacebuilding potential of the ZANU PF Youth League in Zimbabwe between 2008 and 2025. Moving beyond the dominant literature that frames political youth primarily as instruments of violence or authoritarian reproduction, the article uses original doctoral fieldwork from Harare/Highfields and Bulawayo/Entumbane to evaluate whether, how and under what conditions the League can function as a conduit of sustainable peace. Six clusters of peace-related initiative are identified: economic empowerment, political socialisation and mobilisation, inter-party tolerance and dialogue, social cohesion through sports and arts, disability inclusion, and representation and governance reform. The article shows that these initiatives create real opportunities for local stability, particularly when they connect peace to economic participation and widen spaces of youth action. However, their peacebuilding potential is constrained by six structural barriers: adultocracy, tokenism and negative inclusion, bureaucratic and financial exclusion, political polarisation, corruption and nepotism, and educational misalignment. A major cross-site divergence further emerges around historical justice: while Harare/Highfields evidence foregrounds mobilisation, coexistence and digital peace messaging, Bulawayo/Entumbane evidence insists that sustainable peace is impossible without credible truth-telling and restitution around Gukurahundi. The article concludes that the ZANU PF Youth League can contribute to sustainable peace, but only if it shifts from symbolic mobilisation and patronage-heavy engagement toward youth-led, institutionally accountable and genuinely inclusive peacebuilding practice.

Keywords: Youth peacebuilding; ZANU PF Youth League; sustainable peace; Zimbabwe; economic empowerment; adultocracy; tokenism; political polarisation; Gukurahundi; youth policy.

INTRODUCTION

Debates about political youth in Zimbabwe have frequently been organised around the problem of violence. In this debate, the ZANU PF Youth League appears centrally because it has often been associated with coercive mobilisation, election-time intimidation and the reproduction of ruling-party dominance. Yet this is only part of the picture. The League also claims to undertake developmental, cohesion-building and peace-oriented work. This article takes that claim seriously enough to test it empirically. It asks whether the initiatives associated with the ZANU PF Youth League between 2008 and 2025 can credibly be understood as contributing to sustainable peace, and what the limits of those initiatives reveal about youth peacebuilding in Zimbabwe more broadly.

The period under review is important because it begins with the watershed violence of 2008, passes through the Government of National Unity years, traverses the political reconfiguration after 2017 and reaches into 2025, when youth empowerment schemes, digital outreach and peace rhetoric coexist with economic fragility and unresolved historical grievance. This temporal span allows the article to move beyond event-specific commentary and to assess whether an institutional trajectory of peace-oriented youth engagement has become visible over time.

The article makes three claims. First, the ZANU PF Youth League has accumulated a broader repertoire of peace-related initiatives than the older literature usually acknowledges. Second, the impact of these initiatives is uneven because they are embedded in a contradictory environment marked by unemployment, adultocratic gatekeeping,

polarisation, patronage and credibility deficits. Third, any serious assessment of the League's peacebuilding potential must be regionally sensitive: what appears as viable youth peacebuilding in Harare/Highfields may appear politically incomplete in Bulawayo/Entumbane, where Gukurahundi memory and restitution remain central to any account of sustainable peace.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth Wings, Peacebuilding and Authoritarian Ambiguity

The literature on party youth wings in Africa often oscillates between two interpretive poles. On one side are analyses that treat youth wings as instruments of elite control, mobilisation and coercive reproduction. On the other are studies that view youth structures as potential channels of political learning, leadership development and civic engagement. The Zimbabwean case is particularly suited to testing these competing readings because the ZANU PF Youth League is a long-standing, ideologically saturated and politically consequential institution whose public image has been shaped by both developmental discourse and episodes of violence.

Recent work has deepened this debate. The CMI policy brief on authoritarian renewal in Zimbabwe argues that politically active ZANU-PF youth can reproduce ruling-party domination even while privately criticising corruption and nepotism, because they remain economically dependent on party networks and invested in 'staying relevant.' This is a crucial warning against naïve celebratory readings of party youth. At the same time, Mutasa and Ndawana's analysis of post-2008 electoral participation shows that youth involvement in Zimbabwe cannot be reduced to violence. The expansion of voter registration, the rise of youth candidates and the broadening of non-violent participation indicate a more complex picture.

Work on youth and peacebuilding offers a related set of insights. Yingi's thesis on youth development and peacebuilding in Zimbabwe demonstrates that both state and civil-society programmes often fall into symbolic inclusion without meaningful empowerment. Peace Direct's consultation generalises this point by showing that autocracy, rigid donor logics and weak access to resources systematically narrow youth peace agency. Comparative work such as Obaje's study of youth in Jos reminds us that youth are often positioned simultaneously as peacebuilders and as perpetrators, and that this ambivalence cannot be resolved without attention to structural context.

What is still lacking in the Zimbabwean literature is a grounded evaluation of the ZANU PF Youth League's peace claims against empirical evidence from multiple sites and multiple institutional perspectives. Existing commentary either foregrounds coercive mobilisation, opposition protest, digital activism or civil-society peacebuilding. Less work asks what specific initiatives the League has undertaken, how different publics judge those initiatives, and under what conditions they may or may not support sustainable peace. This article addresses that gap. It also integrates themes—social media, disability, church-based trust and Gukurahundi memory—that are often treated separately but which emerged as central in the field evidence.

METHODOLOGY

This article draws on qualitative fieldwork with sixty-four participants in Harare/Highfields and Bulawayo/Entumbane. The field design included four focus group discussions, two sense-making workshops and twenty key informant interviews. The sample spanned former and current Youth League members, Ministry of Youth officials, ZANU PF departmental representatives, a local authority official, faith-based actors, civic organisations, the Zimbabwe Youth Council, the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission and the SADC Regional Peacekeeping Training Centre. The data were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis, generating six initiative clusters and six barrier clusters.

The qualitative design is especially appropriate for evaluating peacebuilding claims because such claims are often contested, relational and experienced differently across institutions and regions. The objective was therefore not to produce a simple scorecard of success or failure, but to assess the credibility, reach, ambivalence and limits of the League's peacebuilding repertoire.

Findings: Six Initiative Clusters

The first cluster, economic empowerment, was the most robustly evidenced. Participants referred to the Presidential Land Scheme, the Presidential Heifer Scheme, EmpowerBank facilities, a 2025 Presidential Youth Empowerment Scheme, pass-on projects and local income-generating assets such as tipper trucks. These initiatives were understood as peacebuilding because they absorb youth into productive activity, reduce vulnerability to manipulation and encourage long-term stakes in community stability.

The second cluster, political socialisation and mobilisation, includes youth solidarity galas, cadre orientations, outreach campaigns and the recent Politics Mu Bhazi initiative. These activities can foster political education, dialogue and youth visibility, but they are also vulnerable to being interpreted as partisan branding. Their peacebuilding value depends on whether they widen agency or simply intensify party loyalty.

The third cluster concerns inter-party tolerance and dialogue. Ministry respondents and community actors described life-skills conflict modules, mixed-party spaces, WhatsApp groups and post-election coexistence practices that help prevent political difference from becoming total social separation. This cluster suggests that the League's peace claims are most credible when they widen contact rather than narrow it.

The fourth cluster involves social cohesion through sports, arts, youth centres and anti-drug interventions. These ordinary infrastructures proved highly significant because they reach beyond overtly political participants and create practical spaces of belonging. The fifth cluster, disability inclusion, reflects a growing insistence that youth peacebuilding must include young persons with disabilities structurally rather than rhetorically. The sixth cluster, representation and governance reform, includes youth quotas, policy access and increased youth presence in governance spaces, all of which matter because sustainable peace requires institutional pathways for youth influence.

Findings: Six Structural Barriers

The first barrier was adultocracy. Participants repeatedly argued that elders restrict youth authority even while invoking the language of empowerment. The second was tokenism or negative inclusion. Youth may be invited, praised and visibly counted without being granted real decision-making influence. The third barrier was resource exclusion, including lack of collateral, small loan sizes, difficult registration procedures for youth-led organisations and weak internship pipelines.

A fourth barrier concerns political polarisation and the partisan–peace tension. Civic and external actors often read League-led initiatives as partisan public relations rather than as credible peacebuilding. Because legitimacy is relational, such perceptions directly affect impact. The fifth barrier was corruption and nepotism in gatekeeping processes, which can transform otherwise stabilising initiatives into sources of grievance. The sixth barrier was educational misalignment: participants argued that formal education remains poorly matched to the practical skills and economic pathways necessary for youth peacebuilding at community level.

Cross-Site Comparison and the Gukurahundi Question

The Harare/Highfields and Bulawayo/Entumbane evidence converged strongly on the importance of empowerment, anti-drug work, tokenism, adultocracy, disability inclusion and the usefulness of social media. The major divergence concerned historical justice. In Harare/Highfields, peacebuilding was discussed largely through the idioms of participation, livelihoods, mobilisation and digital coexistence. In Bulawayo/Entumbane, participants repeatedly insisted that sustainable peace is impossible without confronting the Gukurahundi legacy and its continuing social, economic and memorial consequences.

“Every time we have done these initiatives, those places [mass graves] are destroyed the night after.”

— KII-IBL-BYO

This divergence is analytically decisive. It indicates that national peacebuilding discourse travels unevenly across regions, and that an initiative judged peace-positive in one site may be judged politically insufficient in another

if it does not address historical harm. Sustainable peace in Zimbabwe must therefore be understood as both national and regionally differentiated.

DISCUSSION

The field evidence allows for a qualified reassessment of the ZANU PF Youth League. The League cannot be treated simply as a static residue of violent mobilisation, because participants described a wider repertoire of peace-related initiatives with real local effects. Yet it also cannot be uncritically celebrated as a peacebuilding institution. Its peacebuilding potential is conditional. It is strongest where initiatives are developmental, inclusive, locally useful and open to multiple constituencies. It weakens where programmes remain patronage-heavy, symbolic, top-down or insufficiently attentive to historical grievance.

This conditionality is especially clear when the findings are read through the peace–development nexus. Empowerment schemes, youth centres, sports and anti-drug programmes acquire peacebuilding significance when they alter material incentives and create stakes in stability. But if access to these opportunities is skewed by nepotism, selective loyalty or opaque gatekeeping, the same initiatives may intensify rather than reduce grievance. The lesson is that the design and governance of peace-related initiatives matter as much as their public branding.

A second implication concerns credibility. If peacebuilding is to be sustainable, youth must be treated as co-authors of peace rather than as implementers of pre-scripted agendas. This requires movement from youth-centred to youth-led participation, more transparent programme delivery, deliberate intergenerational reform, and openness to partnerships with trusted actors such as churches, youth councils, municipalities and regionally grounded civic organisations. A third implication concerns history: peace rhetoric that bypasses Gukuruhundi will remain normatively thin in Matabeleland, regardless of how effective it may appear in other domains.

Policy and Scholarly Implications

For policy, the article suggests that youth peacebuilding in Zimbabwe should be institutionalised through transparent empowerment schemes, accessible financing, stronger youth-centre infrastructures, disability-inclusive programming, digital-citizenship training and genuine inter-party contact spaces. Churches and ecumenical bodies should be engaged as trust-bearing partners rather than peripheral moral commentators. The Zimbabwe Youth Council and the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission have potential bridging roles, but their legitimacy depends on visible responsiveness. Most importantly, regional historical grievance must be treated as integral to sustainable peace rather than as an optional add-on.

For scholarship, the article demonstrates the value of analysing ruling-party youth formations through a relational rather than purely denunciatory lens. Doing so does not minimise histories of coercion; instead, it reveals how control, adaptation, developmental rhetoric and local peace work can coexist inside the same institutional field. Future research might track the long-term impact of the Politics Mu Bhazi initiative, compare the ZANU PF Youth League with opposition youth structures, or undertake a dedicated study of disability and youth peacebuilding in Zimbabwe.

CONCLUSION

The ZANU PF Youth League occupies a complex position in Zimbabwe's peace landscape. It carries historical baggage, but it also hosts and claims initiatives with real peacebuilding effects. The question is therefore not whether the League is simply for peace or against it. The question is under what conditions its initiatives move beyond mobilisation toward sustainable peace. The evidence suggests that such movement is possible, but only if the League and surrounding institutions confront adultocracy, tokenism, exclusion, polarisation and historical injustice. Sustainable peace requires youth participation, but it requires more than participation: it requires youth authority, youth trust and youth access to the material and institutional conditions that make peace worth sustaining.

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