

Engaging African Youth as Stakeholders in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding in East Africa

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100900046>

Received: 14 September 2026; Accepted: 19 September 2026; Published: 29 September 2026

ABSTRACT

Peace and security remain essential prerequisites for sustainable development throughout Africa. Yet despite their making up more than 60% of the population of Africa, African youth are often viewed mainly as victims or perpetrators of conflict, rather than as key stakeholders in peacebuilding processes. This study examined the effectiveness of Engaging African Youth as Stakeholders in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding. The study answers the question: How can African youth be meaningfully engaged in peacebuilding, both as agents of change and as stakeholders in post-conflict societies? The study is based on case studies from East Africa. The study draws insights from the European Union's youth peacebuilding strategies to see how regional and international partnerships influence results. The study focuses on how local communities, youth-led organizations, the East African Community, and the European Union work together to support effective peacebuilding initiatives. The study adopted a qualitative desktop research design. The study comprehensively reviews literature relevant to the research topic published between 2020 and 2026. The study reviewed 40 studies that were purposively selected from by governments, civil society organizations, regional bodies, and international partners in East Africa and some EU member states. Thematic analysis was used in analyzing the data and common patterns identified. The study findings are vital in informing policy makers and stakeholders on to community resilience, conflict prevention and resolution, social cohesion and post-conflict recovery. The study draws conclusions on collaboration between African institutions, youth organizations, the EAC and the EU that are key in enhancing the effectiveness of youth-led peacebuilding interventions.

Keywords: African youth, Peacebuilding, Post-conflict, Stakeholders

INTRODUCTION

According to United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security, when youth are provided avenues to participate in civic life and peacebuilding efforts, their involvement in violence declines. According to Arondo (2025) by creating safe spaces that foster coexistence and promote the transformation of relationships through peacebuilding programs, violence can be significantly reduced. Internationally, for instance, youth have been involved in various peace-building programs. An example is the Working Group on Youth and Peacebuilding, which is part of UNs Inter-Agency Network for peacebuilding. The aim of the program is to identify common ground for spearheading youth-led peace and security initiatives globally, with the support of civil society organizations and intergovernmental bodies.

Peace and security are foundational to Africa's development aspirations, including the African Union's Agenda 2063 vision of a prosperous, integrated, and peaceful continent. Promoting sustainable peace is a major concern for world regions, especially one enmeshed in recurring conflict and violence, such as in Africa. Ethnoreligious conflicts, boundary disputes, genocide, resource-based conflicts, and youth restiveness characterize many African nations. According to Akinyetun, Bakare & Adedini, (2023) this idea has been made intricate by a surge in the youth population, massive unemployment, limited education opportunities, and widespread poverty that makes youth key factors in the generation of conflict in Africa. The study further established that at least 15 sub-Saharan African countries were plagued with armed conflicts in 2019. These include Nigeria, Ethiopia, Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, Somalia, Sudan, Cameroon, Burundi, Mali, South Sudan, Mozambique, and Kenya. The conflicts result from corruption, climate change, identity-based contestation, state weakness, marginalization,

inequality, competition for control of natural resources, and ineffective delivery of basic services, among other things.

Armed conflict in Nigeria, Cameroon, Mozambique, and Ethiopia has led to an increase in the killing of civilians and devastating human rights violations.² It is believed that the attack on civilians due to the conflict between armed groups and the state has increased exponentially in sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, these forms of conflict permeate Africa's various regions, particularly the Sahel, West, South, East, North, and Horn of the continent. In West Africa, especially in Nigeria, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, violent extremist groups, secessionist groups, and other armed non-state actors have increased violence and tension in these countries.

Conflicts are now 'widespread and pervasive' and the world is getting more violent, as the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project shows, citing that there has been an increase of over 40% conflicts from 2020 through 2023 and currently one in six people live in an area of active conflict. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), most conflicts are recurrences and not new: around 60% of all armed conflicts recur and 135 countries have now experienced conflict recurrence since 1946. UCDP data also shows that post-conflict societies relapse into violence and conflict within seven years due to grievances like lack of educational and economic opportunities and issues of contention that remain unaddressed for instance ethnic divisions and hatred as well as the state of fragility and crises violent conflicts create. Violent conflicts create the 'conflict trap', a vicious cycle whereby conflict leads to even lower levels of development and opens up new wounds while hardening old, unresolved ones (Nesterova, Kim & Amaglo-Mensah, 2022).

Peacebuilding activities led by multilateral and bilateral institutions and international non-profit organizations are utilized with the intent to reach and sustain peace in such contexts. In this article, we understand peacebuilding as a concept that 'encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable, peaceful relations and to address a wide range of relational, structural, and social issues. Peacebuilding activities range from strengthening technical and human capacities to rebuild flawed or broken systems and structures, promoting sustainable inter-group reconciliation and relationships re-building, to dealing with underlying issues that led to conflict in the first place (Nesterova et al., 2022).

Conflict is ubiquitous in Africa, with countries such as Cameroon, Sudan, and Nigeria among the ten countries in the world with devastating conflicts in 2024. Nigeria is a hotspot of conflict, with the phenomenon pervading its six geopolitical zones. The two most protracted conflicts recorded in the country are the Niger Delta and Boko Haram insurgencies in the Niger Delta and Northeast regions, respectively. Despite the fact that youth are associated with conflict escalation, a comparative study of youth as non-state actors in peacebuilding is understudied, particularly considering the two most intractable sources of conflict. This study contributes to the literature by presenting a discussion of the role of youth in peacebuilding in the Niger Delta and Northeast conflict contexts. It appraises the factors that contribute to the success of youth-peacebuilding initiatives in these regions and the challenges that constrain youth-led peacebuilding efforts in both contexts (Akinyetun, Ebomoyi & Iyase, 2026).

Young people are the future of any society, and their active participation in reconciliation and peacebuilding helps instill values of tolerance, dialogue, and understanding in the next generation. This involvement contributes to achieving more sustainable and enduring peace. Therefore, involving young people in peacebuilding efforts in the region is crucial as they possess significant potential and can play a key role in advancing dialogue. Youth participation in peacebuilding brings several benefits, including their creativity, innovation, and energy. They could challenge entrenched narratives, propose innovative solutions, and utilize modern communication and engagement methods that older generations may not have considered. By engaging young people, we foster future generations that are committed to peace and reconciliation, who approach regional communities with openness rather than hostility (Dzuverovic & Milutinović, 2024)

Adan & Omeje (2025) examined the critical role of Somali youth in peacebuilding, highlighting the challenges they face and the opportunities that exist for their meaningful engagement. In a country shaped by decades of conflict, terrorism, and political fragmentation, youth represent both a vulnerability and a powerful resource for sustainable peace. Guided by the Positive Peace Framework and the Youth, Peace, and Security Agenda (UNSCR

2250), the study argues that empowering Somali youth through inclusive governance, capacity-building, and digital engagement can transform them into effective agents of peace and development.

In Kenya according to Arondo (2025) there is a clear relationship between sports tournaments and reconciliation in conflict-stricken communities. For instance, the case of the Tegla Loroupe Peace Race, organized by a renowned Kenyan athlete Tegla Loroupe, the tournament was initiated as a way of promoting peaceful co-existence and resolving conflicts among warriors from rival tribes in Kapenguria, West Pokot County. Non-governmental organizations, such as Agent of Peace and the Life and Peace Institute, have also utilized sports as an instrument for peacebuilding in Kenya. The study concluded that the effectiveness of sports programs aimed at peacebuilding in Kenya is still not widely researched or published in academic literature. Despite these, sport has mainly been utilized in the context of artistic, talent, and cultural expression.

According to Arondo (2025) citing Wairuri & Kimari (2021) found that major Counties in Kenya are hubs of Kenya's electoral, political, and ethnic violence. The youth have often been blamed and are frequently involved in violence, riots, and unpeaceful demonstrations. In Kenya's leading Counties, such as Nairobi, Mombasa, and Kakamega, cases of youth spearheading and involvement in violence, riots, and peaceful demonstrations are prevalent. Riots and protests erupted in Kenya, especially in the opposition leader Raila Odinga's strongholds, with numerous youths on the forefront, which in the majority of cases turned violent. The study established that during the riots and demos, the youths have often clashed with security forces, looted businesses, and barricaded major roads. The outcome has been injuries, destruction of property, and loss of lives. Riots and anti-government protests against the high cost of living between the years 2011 and 2012, especially due to high food and fuel prices, also strongly hit Nairobi and Mombasa Counties. Youths organized protests with the aim of holding the government accountable to its citizens and addressing the economic hardships faced by many Kenyans, particularly the youth, who were also complaining of poverty and unemployment (Wairuri and Kimari, 2021).

According to Gen Z, the state-centred diplomacy and policy approach favoured the elite, including those in high-level government ranks, elected members of parliaments, and politicians. Even so, peaceful protests with multitudes of youth in the capital, Nairobi, and other major cities across the country, including Kisumu, had begun the previous week, leading up to the week when the members of parliament were to vote on the bill. The outcome of the revolution was historical on the D-Day (Tuesday afternoon – 25 June, 2024), with thousands of youths storming into the Kenyan parliament building amidst strong police presence; damaging parliament property, suspending the parliamentary session that insisted on passing the bill, and even burning a section of parliament (Shilaho and Monyae, 2024).

Shilaho & Monyae (2024) a common trend illustrated by the Gen Z protests was the large number of young people who came out to exercise their democratic and civil rights (Muia, 2024). To put this into context, 75.1% of Kenya's 47.6 million citizens are younger than thirty-five years of age with the youth population aged between 18 and 34 reaching 13.7 million (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS), 2019). Given that the majority of the Kenyan population is classified as youth according to the above statistics, deliberations on peacebuilding cannot be regarded as definitive without incorporating their voice and involving them through activities that can bridge relationships across economic, social, political, and cultural divides.

Despite these developments, young people continue to face marginalization in global peacebuilding processes, and their role continues to be viewed through the lenses of pre-existing assumptions about their incompetency and dangerousness. This study was therefore undertaken in order to assess how engaging African youth as stakeholders in post-conflict peacebuilding in East Africa is progressing

Statement of the Problem

Youth-led and youth-focused peacebuilding initiatives in East Africa are abundant at the community level, yet they remain fragmented, under-resourced, and frequently excluded from national and regional peace architectures. Peacebuilding in post-conflict societies is most effective when youth are engaged as active stakeholders in conflict prevention, governance, reconciliation, and reconstruction, as emphasized by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security. In East Africa, where young people constitute over 60% of the population, they have the potential to drive social cohesion and sustainable peace.

However, evidence shows that youth are more often associated with electoral violence, riots, and protests than with peacebuilding.

In Kenya, demonstrations linked to unemployment, poverty, and governance concerns have frequently escalated into violence, as witnessed during the 2024 Gen Z protests (Arondo, 2025; Muia, 2024; Shilaho & Monyae, 2024). Existing studies largely focus on youth as perpetrators or victims of conflict, with limited attention to their constructive role in peacebuilding across East Africa. This study addresses this gap by examining the opportunities, barriers, and institutional mechanisms for engaging African youth as strategic partners in sustainable post-conflict peacebuilding.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study was anchored on Peacebuilding theory and this section discusses the literature based on one research objective

Peacebuilding Theory

Peacebuilding Theory, advanced by Johan Galtung in 1976, posits that sustainable peace is achieved by addressing the structural, social, political, and economic causes of conflict while promoting reconciliation, justice, and inclusive participation. The theory emphasizes empowering marginalized groups, particularly youth, as active agents of peace rather than viewing them as victims or perpetrators of violence. Aligned with the study *Engaging African Youth as Stakeholders in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding in East Africa*, the theory provides a suitable framework for examining how meaningful youth participation in dialogue, community initiatives, governance, and socioeconomic development contributes to conflict transformation, social cohesion, and sustainable peace across the region.

Conceptualizing Youth, Stakeholdership, and Peacebuilding

The conceptual terrain of youth peacebuilding is shaped by competing framings of young people. A "deficit" framing positions youth as incomplete, at-risk, or in "waithood"—suspended between childhood and full adulthood by structural unemployment and exclusion (Chigudu, 2025a). A "positive youth development" framing, by contrast, treats young people as resources possessing agency, local knowledge, and the capacity to contribute to their communities (Awici, 2025). These two framings are not merely descriptive; they carry different policy implications, and the literature does not fully resolve the tension between them—a programme built on "resilience" rhetoric can just as easily depoliticize youth exclusion as one built on "deficit" rhetoric can pathologize it. The YPS agenda has increasingly privileged the positive framing, recognizing that young people's participation in peace processes is associated with more durable peace (Nilsson & Elfversson, 2021, *peer-reviewed*). This is one of the stronger empirical claims in the field, but it is worth noting that "participation" in such studies is often operationalized loosely (e.g., presence in negotiation delegations), which limits what can be inferred about the causal mechanisms linking youth involvement to durability.

Stakeholdership implies more than presence; it denotes legitimate standing to define problems, shape solutions, and be held accountable for outcomes. In the peacebuilding context, this means youth are not merely beneficiaries of programmes designed for them, but co-designers and decision-makers within peace processes, transitional justice mechanisms, and recovery frameworks (McMullin, 2022, *peer-reviewed*). The distance between this normative ideal and programming practice—illustrated further below—is substantial, and much of the literature reviewed here describes aspiration more than achievement.

Global and Regional Policy Frameworks

The YPS agenda rests on a sequence of UN Security Council resolutions. UNSCR 2250 (2015) was the first to place young people at the centre of conflict prevention, resolution, and post-conflict rebuilding; UNSCR 2419 (2018) called for increased representation of youth in negotiations; and UNSCR 2535 (2020) urged member states to develop and implement National Action Plans (NAPs) on YPS and to protect young peacebuilders (United Nations Security Council, 2015, 2018, 2020, *primary policy documents*). These resolutions establish

normative commitments rather than empirical findings, and their citation here should be read as evidence of agenda-setting, not of programme effectiveness. Subsequent resolutions have further consolidated these pillars, including through renewed emphasis on the protection of civic space for young peacebuilders (Centro di Ateneo per i Diritti Umani, University of Padua, 2026, *university human rights centre publication—not peer-reviewed research*).

At the continental level, the AU's African Youth Charter (2006), particularly Article 17 on peace and security, established an early normative foundation for youth inclusion, while the CFYPS (2020, *AU policy framework*) and its ten-year implementation plan operationalized the five YPS pillars across 23 key activities for the AU, Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and member states (Global Campaign for Peace Education, 2026, *advocacy/organizational source*). The AU's Youth for Peace (Africa) Programme and its African Youth Ambassadors for Peace initiative have sought to translate these commitments into practice, although implementation remains uneven (AU PAPS, n.d.-a, *AU institutional website—self-reported and undated*). This last point deserves emphasis: assessments of "uneven implementation" here rest on the AU's own institutional materials rather than independent evaluation, which limits the claim's evidentiary weight and should caution against treating it as a verified outcome.

The East African Context

The East African Community (EAC) constitutes a regional peace and security architecture that includes early warning mechanisms, mediation efforts, and peace support operations (Mahroza et al., 2023, *peer-reviewed*). The EAC's engagement with youth, however, remains comparatively underdeveloped, and the integration of YPS principles into EAC programming has lagged behind the continental agenda. The African Union, RECs, the EU, and the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) have agreed to strengthen coordination and the implementation of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), with explicit attention to the inclusiveness of youth and children in APSA programming (African Union, Peace and Security Department [AU PSD], 2025, *AU institutional communication*). This signals a growing, if still incipient, regional commitment to youth inclusion—though, again, the claim of "growing commitment" is sourced from the AU's own department rather than from independent assessment, and the literature offers no comparative evidence of outcomes at EAC level to substantiate whether this commitment has translated into measurable change.

Youth, Unemployment, and Conflict

A substantial body of literature links youth unemployment and economic exclusion to conflict vulnerability. Chigudu (2025a) frames youth unemployment and economic exclusion as major drivers of instability, identifying social exclusion, political marginalization, and economic deprivation as primary factors behind youth involvement in violence. In Tanzania, Mlade and Mnyavanu (2025, *peer-reviewed*) demonstrate that cyclical, structural and frictional unemployment in Dar es Salaam produces feelings of marginalization that manifest in protests and social disorder. These findings underscore that peacebuilding cannot be divorced from livelihoods; economic inclusion is itself a conflict-prevention and reintegration strategy. It is worth flagging, however, that the causal direction in much of this literature runs from unemployment to unrest rather than the reverse, and few studies in this review isolate the effect of a specific youth-employment *intervention* on conflict outcomes—the evidence base is stronger on the diagnosis (unemployment breeds grievance) than on the cure (which interventions reduce it).

Gender, Intersectionality, and Young Women's Peacebuilding

Gender shapes both conflict and peace. Gordon and Fosu (2025, *peer-reviewed*), examining Acholi traditional justice in post-conflict northern Uganda, argue that the "local turn" in peacebuilding can, in patriarchal settings, reaffirm oppressive gender power relations and consolidate inequalities. This is a notably critical empirical finding within the reviewed literature, cautioning against romanticizing "local" or "traditional" mechanisms as inherently more legitimate or inclusive than formal ones.

Chigudu (2024) notes that the Women, Peace and Security agenda, while progressive, remains little known beyond policy and activist circles in Africa—a finding that, if generalizable, raises questions about the real-world

reach of the YPS agenda discussed above, given the two agendas' structural parallels. A systematic review by Lwamba et al. (2022, *peer-reviewed, systematic review—among the higher-quality evidence cited here*) found that interventions supporting women's empowerment in fragile contexts produced positive effects, but that gender norms must be explicitly targeted to maximize impact. Young women, in particular, face compounded exclusion at the intersection of age and gender (Ali et al., 2024, *peer-reviewed*).

Comparative Overview

The table below draws together the country- and context-specific material discussed above. It is worth noting as a critical observation in its own right that the literature reviewed here is thin on *country-level, outcome-evaluated* youth peacebuilding interventions: most sources address regional or continental policy architecture rather than documented programme results, and only two contexts (Uganda and Tanzania) offer contextually specific empirical detail. This imbalance—rich in normative framework, sparse in evaluated practice—is itself a gap the field needs to address.

Table 1

Comparative Overview of Country- and Context-Specific Youth Peacebuilding Literature

Country/Region	Conflict/Post-Conflict Context	Youth Intervention/Mechanism	Evidence of Outcomes	Barriers	Institutional Support
Uganda (Acholi, northern Uganda)	Post-conflict transitional justice setting	Acholi traditional (customary) justice mechanisms, examined through a “local turn” lens	Gordon and Fosu (2025) found that local justice mechanisms can reaffirm patriarchal power relations rather than resolve them, a critical, negative finding on the assumed benefits of localisation.	Entrenched gender power structures; risk that local legitimacy masks the reproduction of inequality	Not a state-led YPS/CFYPS programme; operates outside the formal AU/UN youth peace architecture
Tanzania (Dar es Salaam)	Structural economic marginalisation (not active armed conflict, but conflict-adjacent unrest)	No formal peacebuilding intervention; unemployment (cyclical, structural, and frictional) examined as a driver	Mlade and Mnyavanu (2025) documented unemployment-driven marginalisation manifesting as protest and social disorder; evidence of a risk factor rather than of an intervention's effectiveness.	Structural and frictional unemployment; absence of a documented economic-inclusion programme to evaluate	None identified in the cited literature
Africa (continental)	Varied post-conflict and fragile settings across AU member states	CFYPS (2020) five-pillar framework; Youth for Peace (Africa) Programme; African Youth Ambassadors for Peace	Implementation described as “uneven” by AU PAPS (n.d.-a), an institutional self-assessment rather than an independent evaluation; no outcome data provided.	Uneven implementation across RECs and member states; undated, self-reported institutional evidence limits verifiability	Strong formal architecture (African Youth Charter, Art. 17; CFYPS); coordination with the EU

Country/Region	Conflict/Post-Conflict Context	Youth Intervention/Mechanism	Evidence of Outcomes	Barriers	Institutional Support
					and ECOSOCC (AU PSD, 2025)
East African Community (regional)	Regional peace and security architecture (early warning, mediation, peace support)	APSA youth and children inclusiveness commitments	No outcome evidence located; commitment described as “growing, if still incipient” based on AU PSD institutional communication.	YPS integration into EAC programming has “lagged behind” the continental agenda; no independent evaluation located	APSA coordination among the AU, RECs, EU, and ECOSOCC
Global/cross-regional (fragile states, unspecified)	Fragile and conflict-affected settings generally	Women’s/youth economic empowerment interventions (gender-targeted)	Lwamba et al. (2022), a peer-reviewed systematic review, found positive effects on empowerment, conditional on programmes explicitly targeting gender norms.	Programmes that do not address underlying gender norms show diminished impact	Not tied to a specific state or AU/UN programme; synthesis across studies

Note. AU = African Union; APSA = African Peace and Security Architecture; CFYPS = Continental Framework on Youth, Peace and Security; ECOSOCC = Economic, Social and Cultural Council; EU = European Union; REC = Regional Economic Community; YPS = Youth, Peace and Security.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative desktop research design, consistent with its aim of synthesising and thematically analysing existing scholarship, policy, and practice literature. No primary data were collected from human participants; the study relies entirely on secondary sources. As the study was conducted by a single researcher, measures to support analytical consistency were built into the design, including a predefined coding matrix and reflexive memoing to surface and manage researcher assumptions.

A purposively selected body of documents was reviewed. Sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, policy and legal instruments, reports by governments, civil society organisations, regional bodies (AU, EAC), and international partners (UN agencies, the EU), and reputable practice and news documentation. The core of the review focused on literature and policy documents published between 2020 and 2026; foundational instruments such as UNSCR 2250 (2015) and the African Youth Charter (2006) were retained where necessary to establish the normative baseline of the Youth, Peace and Security agenda, as is standard practice in policy-oriented reviews. Sources were required to address, directly or substantively, youth engagement in peacebuilding, post-conflict recovery, or violent-extremism prevention in East Africa, or the EU's youth peacebuilding strategies.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the literature. Documents were read in full, coded against the predefined coding matrix derived from the research objectives and theoretical framework, and then re-coded inductively to

capture emergent themes. Codes were grouped into themes, and patterns, convergences, and divergences across the four country cases were identified. Findings are presented thematically, with case-study illustrations drawn from Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Rwanda.

As a desktop study, this paper relied on the availability and quality of secondary sources and cannot capture the lived, real-time experiences of youth peacebuilders. The geographic focus on four EAC states, while analytically useful, limits generalisability beyond East Africa. The reliance on English-language sources may also under-represent francophone and lusophone peacebuilding practice. Finally, the political sensitivity of some contexts particularly Rwanda means that available literature may reflect official narratives, and findings are interpreted with appropriate caution.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis yielded eight interrelated themes, developed and applied as described below.

Analytical approach to theme development.

The eight themes were generated through an iterative thematic synthesis of the reviewed literature rather than primary qualitative coding of interview or survey data. Coding began deductively, using the five YPS pillars (participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and disengagement/reintegration) as an initial sensitizing frame. This deductive start was combined with inductive, line-by-line coding of the claims made across the corpus peer-reviewed studies, UN/AU policy instruments, and organizational or news reporting to capture recurring patterns not anticipated by the YPS pillars alone (for example, digital activism and psychosocial healing, which cut across the formal pillars). Candidate codes were then grouped, compared across sources, and collapsed or split until each retained theme met three criteria: it recurred across more than one source and, where possible, more than one source type; it was conceptually distinct from the other seven; and it corresponded to a substantive link in the pathway from youth involvement to a peacebuilding outcome, rather than a restatement of policy language. Themes are therefore best read as synthesized patterns across a heterogeneous evidence base, not as codes validated through independent inter-rater coding of primary data — a limitation made explicit here rather than left implicit, consistent with the evidentiary caution applied to the literature review above.

The thematic analysis yielded eight interrelated themes as discussed below.

Youth as Agents of Change Rather Than Security Threats

Across the literature, a consistent finding is the need to reframe youth from security risks to agents of change. Chigudu (2025a) argues that the dominant portrayal of unemployed youth as a threat obscures their potential contributions and that inclusive governance and access to decent employment empower young people as peacebuilders. The YPS resolutions themselves were a positive move toward changing the narrative of youth as perpetrators or victims and elevating their roles as peacebuilders (AU PAPS, n.d.-a). In practice, however, securitised approaches persist, particularly in countering violent extremism, where youth are often framed primarily as populations to be prevented from radicalisation rather than partners in prevention (Kabugi, 2025).

Youth Participation in Local Peace Committees, Mediation, and Dialogue

Youth engage substantively in local peace infrastructure. In northern Uganda, Awici (2025) found that approximately half of young people surveyed had participated in peacebuilding interventions and valued their participation because they were themselves victims of conflict. Yet the majority believed they lacked the space and support to harness their potential. In Kenya, civil society inclusion—including youth groups—in peace processes has been shown to improve the prospects for durable peace (Nilsson & Elfversson, 2021), and applied theatre and peacebuilding projects have created spaces for youth-led dialogue (Smith & Okuto, 2023). Kenya has also formalised youth engagement through a national youth mediation and peace-building network and community engagement programmes that bring together religious leaders, elders, women, youth, and peace committees (Kenya News Agency, 2026).

Economic Inclusion, Livelihoods, and Prevention of Recruitment

Economic exclusion emerges as a central driver of both conflict and recruitment into violence, and livelihoods support as a corresponding peacebuilding intervention. Chigudu (2025a) identifies targeted peacebuilding initiatives, inclusive governance, and access to quality employment as pathways through which youth are empowered as peacebuilders. In Kenya, the Catholic Church has supported over 20,000 youth through vocational training, entrepreneurship incubation, and peacebuilding workshops, contributing to social cohesion and nonviolent conflict resolution (Kabugi, 2025). The EU-funded Kenya Community Engagement and Resilience Programme in Marsabit illustrates the integration of economic empowerment—brick-making enterprises, beekeeping, digital marketing training—with violent-extremism prevention, deliberately targeting vulnerable women and youth (Kenya News Agency, 2026). In Tanzania, youth unemployment in Dar es Salaam has been linked directly to social unrest, with cyclical unemployment showing the strongest correlation with disorder (Mlade & Mnyavanu, 2025).

Digital Activism, Media, and Youth-Led Civic Engagement

Digital platforms have become important arenas for youth peacebuilding and civic engagement. In Sierra Leone, youth-led movements have used social media, the arts, and entrepreneurship to promote communication and reconciliation (Chigudu, 2025b). In Kenya's Marsabit programme, "Digital Peace Ambassadors" use TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and X to counter misinformation, discourage hate speech, and promote peaceful coexistence (Kenya News Agency, 2026). However, digital spaces are ambivalent: Ali et al. (2024) found that social media polarisation in Ethiopia marginalised women's voices in peacebuilding, and that hostile online environments, the digital divide, and cultural norms constrain participation. Digital engagement thus offers potential but requires deliberate design to be inclusive and to avoid amplifying division.

Gender, Intersectionality, and Young Women's Peacebuilding Roles

Young women's peacebuilding contributions are often invisible. Gordon and Fosu (2025) demonstrate that localising transitional justice in northern Uganda can reaffirm patriarchal gender relations, and Chigudu (2024) notes the limited reach of the WPS agenda among ordinary African populations. The systematic evidence indicates that interventions supporting women's empowerment in fragile contexts produce positive outcomes, but only when restrictive gender norms are explicitly addressed (Lwamba et al., 2022). In Kenya, women leaders have been at the forefront of community resilience against violent extremism and gender-based violence, with programmes deliberately empowering women as peace champions alongside youth engagement (Dawan Africa, 2026). These findings underscore the need for intersectional approaches that recognise the distinct experiences of young women and men.

Psychosocial Healing, Trauma Recovery, and Reintegration

Post-conflict recovery depends on psychosocial healing. In Rwanda, lawmakers have called for expanded trauma healing and psychosocial support services, stronger youth engagement to counter genocide ideology, and improved reintegration programmes for genocide convicts (The New Times, 2026). UNESCO has worked to transform genocide memorial sites into places of dialogue and learning for peace, contributing to intergenerational reconciliation (UNESCO, 2026). In northern Uganda, youth participation in peacebuilding was valued in part for its contribution to self-discovery, improved self-esteem, and securing the future of communities—functions closely tied to psychosocial recovery (Awici, 2025). These cases illustrate that reintegration and healing are inseparable from meaningful youth engagement.

The Role of Youth-Led Organisations and Civil Society

Youth-led organisations are critical but constrained actors. Kasherwa (2019), examining Burundi and the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, found that youth organisations constructively promote a culture of peace at community level but are limited by resistance to youth culture, inadequate institutional support, financial constraints, and the failing post-war transition to peace. A key challenge is the lack of a smooth transition for youth from local, non-governmental efforts to national, governmental peacebuilding. In Sierra Leone, youth-led

social movements have driven grassroots involvement in governance and mended societal divisions, though restricted financial resources, entrenched social norms, and limited political participation persist (Chigudu, 2025b). Interpeace and similar organisations have emphasised the need to shift from symbolic consultation to sustained, structured, and accountable youth engagement (Interpeace, 2025).

Barriers to Meaningful Engagement

Several recurring barriers constrain meaningful youth engagement: tokenism and symbolic consultation (McMullin, 2022); unemployment and economic exclusion (Chigudu, 2025a; Mlade & Mnyavanu, 2025); mistrust between youth and state authorities; funding gaps for youth-led initiatives (Kasherwa, 2019; Chigudu, 2025b); political exclusion and limited civic space; and negative community stereotypes of youth (Awici, 2025). In Tanzania, youth have themselves called for accountability, equality, transparency, and the establishment of community-level youth councils to strengthen direct representation in government structures (The Citizen, 2026). These barriers are structural rather than incidental, and addressing them requires institutional rather than merely programmatic responses.

CASE STUDY DISCUSSION

Kenya

Kenya's peacebuilding landscape is shaped by recurrent electoral violence, the threat of violent extremism along the coast and in the north-east, and a vibrant civil society. Civil society inclusion in peace processes, including through youth groups and religious leaders, has been associated with more durable peace outcomes (Nilsson & Elfversson, 2021). Applied theatre and peacebuilding projects have provided platforms for youth expression and community dialogue, though practitioners report challenges of funding, support, and collaboration (Smith & Okuto, 2023). The Catholic Church has contributed significantly to youth empowerment and radicalisation prevention through vocational training and peacebuilding workshops (Kabugi, 2025). Recent initiatives, including the EU-funded Kenya Community Engagement and Resilience Programme in Marsabit, integrate community engagement, economic empowerment, and digital peace ambassadorship, illustrating a multi-stakeholder model in which youth are positioned as partners alongside security agencies, elders, and women's groups (Kenya News Agency, 2026). Kenya's case demonstrates the value of combining local peace infrastructure with livelihoods and digital engagement, while also highlighting persistent coordination challenges.

Uganda

Uganda's peacebuilding context is defined by the legacy of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) conflict in the north, ongoing refugee hosting, and post-conflict reintegration challenges. Awici (2025) found that youth in northern Uganda valued participation in peacebuilding because they were themselves victims of conflict, yet lacked the space and support to realise their potential; a supported youth-led initiative, however, proved effective and a source of hope for peace. Gordon and Fosu (2025) caution that localised transitional justice approaches, such as Acholi traditional justice, can reinforce patriarchal gender inequalities, underscoring the need for gender-sensitive reintegration. Uganda's case illustrates both the promise and the limits of localised, youth-centred peacebuilding: agency exists, but it requires networks of supportive stakeholders to translate into sustained outcomes (Awici, 2025).

Rwanda

Rwanda presents a distinctive post-genocide reconciliation context in which youth are central to intergenerational memory and social cohesion. The country has invested in civic education and national unity programmes, and UNESCO has worked to transform genocide memorial sites into spaces of dialogue and learning for peace (UNESCO, 2026). Young Rwandans, three decades on, articulate both progress and unresolved pain, reflecting the long horizon of post-genocide recovery (Al Jazeera, 2026). Rwandan lawmakers have called for stronger youth engagement to counter genocide ideology, expanded trauma healing and psychosocial services, and improved reintegration programmes for genocide convicts (The New Times, 2026). While Rwanda's reconciliation achievements are substantial, the political sensitivity of the context means that

youth engagement operates within constrained civic space, and findings are interpreted with caution. The case nonetheless underscores that youth are indispensable to memory, healing, and the prevention of recurrence.

Tanzania

Tanzania differs from the other three cases. It is not a classic post-conflict state; rather, it functions as a conflict-prevention, refugee-hosting, and regional-stability case, with emerging concerns about violent extremism and youth unrest. During the 2020 general elections, youth engagement in democratic processes and peacebuilding in Dodoma was examined in light of the AU African Youth Charter and the AU Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, revealing both the normative demand for youth participation and the practical constraints on realising it (Sengati, 2023). Youth unemployment in Dar es Salaam has been empirically linked to social unrest, with cyclical unemployment the strongest predictor of disorder (Mlade & Mnyavanu, 2025). Through the UNDP-supported Dumisha Amani (Sustain Peace) project, Tanzanian youth have proposed measures including accountability, transparency, participation, and the establishment of community-level youth councils to strengthen representation (The Citizen, 2026). Tanzania's case demonstrates that meaningful youth engagement is essential even in contexts not defined by recent armed conflict, as a preventive and stabilizing investment.

Case Study Discussion

The four cases Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and Tanzania — were not selected as a representative sample but as deliberately contrasting conflict typologies, so that the eight themes could be tested against different structural conditions rather than a single conflict type: Uganda represents post-conflict transitional justice following an active armed insurgency (the LRA conflict); Rwanda represents post-genocide reconciliation, a qualitatively different and more politically sensitive recovery context; Kenya represents a fragile-but-stable state facing recurrent electoral violence and violent-extremism risk rather than a single defined conflict episode; and Tanzania represents a non-post-conflict, conflict-prevention case, included precisely because it falls outside the "post-conflict" category the YPS agenda was originally designed around.

Each case is discussed against the same five comparative dimensions used in the table above — conflict/post-conflict context, the dominant youth intervention or mechanism, the strength and type of outcome evidence, the barriers reported, and the institutional support in place — so that similarities and differences across cases are traceable rather than impressionistic. Read together, the four cases show a gradient of evidence quality (strongest in Uganda and Tanzania, where peer-reviewed empirical studies exist; weakest in Kenya and Rwanda, where the literature is dominated by institutional and news reporting) that mirrors the same imbalance identified in the literature review as a whole.

Lessons from EU Youth Peacebuilding Strategies

The EU has emerged as a significant peace and security partner in East Africa, and its youth peacebuilding strategies offer transferable lessons. The EU Youth Action Plan in EU External Action (YAP), adopted for 2022–2027, is the framework through which the EU promotes meaningful youth participation, youth skills and leadership, and civic engagement in its partner countries. Its flagship Africa-Europe Youth Academy, part of the Global Gateway Africa–Europe investment package, supports youth organisations with grants, training, and coaching to develop leadership, skills, and civic engagement (European External Action Service, 2026a). At the policy level, the EU is guided by the 2019–2027 EU Youth Strategy and its Youth Stakeholders Group, which facilitates exchanges between European youth organisations, national youth councils, researchers, and member states, and supports a "youth check" process to assess the impact of policies on young people.

The EU also integrates youth and gender into its peace and security policy. The Women, Peace and Security agenda is a cornerstone of EU foreign and security policy, operationalised through the EU Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security and member-state National Action Plans, with the EU and several member states committing to a minimum 33% target for women's participation in EU-supported peace process activities (EEAS, 2026b). Several EU member states have begun developing National Action Plans on Youth, Peace and Security; Italy's first NAP (2026–2029), for instance, institutionalises youth participation in peacebuilding and foreign policy (Centro di Ateneo per i Diritti Umani, University of Padua, 2026).

Several lessons emerge for East Africa. First, the EU's institutionalised "youth check" mechanism offers a model for ensuring that the impact of policies on young people is systematically assessed—a practice largely absent in East African policy processes. Second, the EU's use of dedicated funding instruments for youth organisations addresses the financing gap that repeatedly constrains youth-led peacebuilding in the region (Kasherwa, 2019; Chigudu, 2025b). Third, the EU's integration of the YPS and WPS agendas reflects the intersectional reality that youth engagement must be gender-responsive. Importantly, EU-supported programmes already operate in the region; the Kenya Community Engagement and Resilience Programme, funded by the EU through the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund, illustrates a partnership model in which EU financing supports locally led, youth-inclusive peacebuilding (Kenya News Agency, 2026). The lesson is not to transplant EU models wholesale, but to adapt their institutional mechanisms—structured participation, dedicated financing, and policy mainstreaming—to the East African context, in ways that reinforce rather than substitute for African leadership.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings confirm that engaging African youth as stakeholders in post-conflict peacebuilding is both normatively mandated and empirically justified, yet remains inadequately realised. Viewed through the lens of stakeholder theory, the central problem is not the absence of youth activity but the absence of institutional structures that grant young people legitimate standing in peace processes (McMullin, 2022). Youth peacebuilding is abundant at the community level but struggles to transition to national and governmental levels (Kasherwa, 2019), reflecting what might be termed a "participation gap" between local agency and formal inclusion.

Meaningful engagement, the evidence suggests, requires several mutually reinforcing conditions. First, institutional voice: youth need structured representation in peace committees, mediation processes, and policy formulation, not merely consultation (The Citizen, 2026; Nilsson & Elfversson, 2021). Second, resources: dedicated, accessible funding for youth-led organisations is essential, as financial constraints repeatedly emerge as a primary barrier (Kasherwa, 2019; Chigudu, 2025b). Third, livelihoods: economic inclusion is itself peacebuilding, given the well-established link between unemployment and conflict vulnerability (Chigudu, 2025a; Mlade & Mnyavanu, 2025). Fourth, psychosocial support: healing and reintegration are inseparable from participation (Awici, 2025; The New Times, 2026). Fifth, gender responsiveness: youth engagement must recognise the compounded exclusion of young women and the risk that localised approaches reinforce patriarchal norms (Gordon & Fosu, 2025; Lwamba et al., 2022). Sixth, accountability: partnerships among African institutions, youth organisations, the EAC, and the EU must shift from symbolic consultation to sustained, structured, and accountable engagement (Interpeace, 2025).

The comparative case analysis reveals that context shapes the form youth engagement should take. In post-electoral and violent-extremism-affected Kenya, the integration of local peace committees, livelihoods, and digital engagement is promising. In post-LRA Uganda, supported youth-led initiatives demonstrate effectiveness but require scaled institutional backing. In post-genocide Rwanda, youth are central to memory and reconciliation within a constrained civic environment. In Tanzania, youth engagement is a preventive investment in stability. Across all four cases, the common thread is that youth agency exists; what is often missing is the institutional architecture to channel it into sustained peacebuilding.

The lessons from EU strategies reinforce rather than replace these findings. The EU's institutional mechanisms—a youth check, dedicated financing, and mainstreaming of YPS and WPS—offer adaptable models for strengthening the institutional architecture within which East African youth peacebuilding operates. Critically, the AU, RECs, the EU, and ECOSOCC have already committed to strengthening coordination and youth inclusion within the APSA (AU PSD, 2025), providing a regional platform on which these lessons can be built.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how African youth can be meaningfully engaged in post-conflict peacebuilding as both agents of change and stakeholders. The review of literature from 2020 to 2026, across Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Rwanda, and drawing on EU youth peacebuilding strategies, leads to the conclusion that meaningful youth engagement requires a deliberate shift from tokenistic inclusion to substantive

stakeholdership. Youth are not a demographic to be managed but legitimate stakeholders whose participation, when properly supported, contributes to community resilience, conflict prevention, social cohesion, and post-conflict recovery.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Develop and implement National Action Plans on Youth, Peace and Security, aligned with the AU CFYPS and its ten-year implementation plan, with measurable targets and dedicated budgets.
2. Integrate YPS principles into the EAC peace and security architecture, including early warning and mediation mechanisms, and coordinate with the AU on CFYPS implementation.
3. Establish a regional youth peacebuilding fund and platform to resource and connect youth-led organisations across member states.

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