Youth Agency and Peacebuilding: An Analysis of the Role of Formal and Non-Formal Education

Synthesis Report on Findings from Myanmar, Pakistan, South Africa and Uganda

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Executive Summary

This Synthesis Report aims to understand the ways in which the agency of youth – or their ‘space for manoeuvre’ – is impacted (or not) through a range of formal and non-formal education interventions, and how this enables or restricts young people to contribute to processes of peacebuilding and social cohesion, either in political, socio-cultural or economic ways. It combines a focus on youth agency, peacebuilding and education – an intersection that is often not addressed simultaneously. Recognising education’s potential to enhance or undermine processes of sustainable peacebuilding and social cohesion, this report brings together a focus on the role of formal and non-formal education initiatives that are available to (some) youth in four conflict-affected countries: Myanmar, Pakistan, South Africa and Uganda. In addressing these issues the report aims to provide useful analysis and reflection for a range of audiences including scholars, practitioners and other professionals working in youth-related policy and programming as well as youth themselves, whose voice is too frequently marginalized.

Analytical framework and Methodology

This report highlights the consortium’s theoretical framework and insights from literature on youth agency in conflict-affected settings as presented in our earlier developed Literature Review (Lopes Cardozo, Higgins, Maber, Brandt, Kusmallah, Le Mat, 2015) (see chapter 2). The youth agency specific methodology builds on:

- The consortium’s 4Rs theoretical framework: the role of key processes of representation (participation in decision making - political), redistribution (equity in the distribution of resources - economic), recognition (affirming the diversity of identities) and reconciliation (healing across divides) within peacebuilding and the location of youth within these;
- the Strategic Relational Approach (SRA) to explore the space for manoeuvre available to youth to exercise agency in relation to peacebuilding; a Cultural Political Economy (CPE) approach: combining attention to the cultural (subject and identity formation) as well as political and economic dimensions of the intersections between education and peacebuilding;
- and insights from literature on youth agency in conflict-affected settings (Lopes Cardozo et al., 2015), claiming that we need a more comprehensive understanding of youth agency for peacebuilding, by moving away from a victim-perpetrators binary to an understanding of heterogeneous constituencies embedded within and reacting to processes of conflict and peace;
- resulting in an exploratory and qualitative methodology using critical and participatory data gathering and analysis methods.
The four country case studies (Pakistan, Myanmar, South Africa, and Uganda, see chapter 3) were selected with the intention of providing the maximum variety of contrast relating to the relationship between education and peacebuilding, in terms of geographical diversity, the nature and temporality of the conflict contexts explored and the drivers and root causes that underpin them. South Africa, emerged out of the struggle against apartheid, a conflict rooted in racism and social exclusion, whose legacies and inequalities remain more than two decades after the cessation of armed conflict. South Africa provides us with a rich resource to reflect more historically on the challenges and possibilities for the education system to contribute to promoting sustainable peacebuilding. Uganda, another country in Africa, remains divided between a peaceful South and Central Region and a Northern region that has suffered a series of punctuated armed conflicts for almost three decades. Pakistan, in South Asia, is a huge country that has suffered from a series of conflicts in recent years, linked to instability in Afghanistan, the global ‘war on terror’, regional tensions with its neighbour India and violent internal political unrest. Finally, Myanmar, presents us with a case study from South East Asia, of a country on the brink of entering a post-conflict period after decades of highly authoritarian rule, challenged by a range of armed and non-armed ethnic and political movements. The rich diversity of research sites emphasises the need for conflict sensitive, contextually coherent approaches to enhancing the role and potential of education in peacebuilding processes in each context, while serving to enrich globally relevant insights and reflections on the differing challenges, possibilities and potentials of education, as a key social sector, in the promotion of sustainable peace-promoting societies.

Synthesis of Main findings: Placing Youth Central to the Analysis

When situating youth within the four country contexts, and highlighting the specific cultural, political economy challenges faced by young people in these wide range of geographic settings, common challenges young people face across conflict-affected contexts are underscored. They include:

- High levels of unemployment and lack of access to labour markets;
- Exclusion from decision-making/political processes at local and national levels;
- Alienated relationships with the state;
- Disengagement and frustration with the apparent irrelevance of formal educational provision;
- Widespread experiences of direct as well as indirect violence; and
- Structural gender inequalities reinforced by education and lack of adequate policy and programmatic attention.

These daily realities highlight how youth agency and well-being is, in all country contexts, deeply affected, constrained and shaped by the continuing existence of drivers of economic, political and cultural conflict.
The report discusses the voices of youth respondents, including how youth see peace, (formal) education and their most pressing challenges in relation to gendered inequalities and violence. Peace for youth in all four country contexts appeared to be a multi-faceted phenomenon, ranging from ‘negative peace’ (absence of direct violence) to ‘positive peace’ (reflecting equality and justice). A great range of youth perspectives indeed concerned the absence of fear/experiences of direct and indirect violence, and being able to trust. On top of that, their experience of freedom of movement and perception of opportunities to exercise their agency as peacebuilders were vital dimensions to youth’s definitions of peace.

Youth-Related Framings and Policies

Main insights on framings of youth as represented within policy and societal discourses, reveal that these framings of youth generally reflect a dichotomous perception of youth as either a threat or a great potential for a country’s security, stability and development, which has been articulated in a variety of literature (see e.g. Kemper, 2005; McEvoy-Levy, 2006; Lopes Cardozo et al., 2015). Notably, in synthesizing findings from Pakistan, Myanmar, South Africa, and Uganda, the “youth bulge”1 was a recognised issue in all country contexts of study. This youth bulge on the one hand is seen a threat, as surely there are implications for youth (un-) employment and respective frustrations and grievances this might cause, and on the other hand, and on a more positive note, the large numbers of youth in (post-) conflict societies are also perceived as a potential force for economic, and social, political development. Bringing together the insights from the four country studies, we see a clear prioritization of seeing youth for economic development and growth. In a way, this can be connected to a broader observation that in most contexts, a (globally inspired, yet locally adopted) liberal peace thesis is dominantly influencing policy and investment directions, focusing on first strengthening markets and democratic governance, while often leaving aside (or for a later moment) substantial investments in social sectors, including education and other youth-relevant areas such as health. Secondly, in highlighting main reflections on (the absence of) youth-relevant policy frameworks in all contexts, our empirical findings confirm insight from the literature review on youth agency, education and peacebuilding (Lopes Cardozo et al., 2015), in the sense that there is an absence of youth voice in policy and programming, which is problematic for ensuring adequate responses to youth needs and constituencies in post-conflict societies and education systems.

Formal and Non-Formal Education Initiatives for the Promotion of Youth Agency for Sustainable Peace

Four-country analysis of a wide range of formal and non-formal education interventions have informed our analysis of the ways in which these focus on building respective socio-cultural, political and economic aspects of youth agency. The report outlines how (non-) formal education might work to empower youth,

1 The term “youth bulge” is increasingly used and gaining popularity in international writing about the increasing youth population. The authors of the report recognise the uncontested nature of the term, however would like to point out here that its widespread use is illustrative of the variety of (negative) youth framings entering the peacebuilding domain.
what scope of youth constituencies is being reached and finally the extent to which interventions are context-responsive, and what this means.

In relation to youth experience of formal education provision, the research teams uncovered what can only be described as a tragic paradox in relation to formal education provision in most of the conflict-affected contexts under study, few exceptional schools left aside. On the one hand, as noted above, youth have high expectations of the promise of education to impact their lives across multiple dimensions of their agency. On the other hand, the systemic exclusion of the majority of youth from secondary education, as well as serious weaknesses in curricula content and pedagogical processes undermine its potential to contribute to forms of political, economic, social and cultural empowerment that may enhance youth peacebuilding agency. Moreover, the resulting disillusion and disaffection noted by the research teams intersectionally cuts across class, gender and ethnic differences, with educated middle class male urban youth being just as likely to be dissatisfied – albeit of a different nature – with their education experience as poorer and more marginalised constituencies.

Research on non-formal interventions underlined the very small and exclusive numbers benefiting. Youth needs in relation to work, political representation and cultural identity were addressed in interventions that aimed to provide relevant knowledges and skills. Interventions that recognised and built upon the existing initiatives and courage of youth facing challenging circumstances were particularly effective. However, we found that inattention to the contexts and daily realities of youth often undermines (or even reverses) the potential of education to enhance the agency of their youth participants in relation to labour market opportunities, cultural affirmation or participate in decision-making processes at local and national (political) levels. Moreover, the relational dimensions of youth agency – in particular their negotiation of inter-generational tensions and multi-level relationships with state authorities including the police and local government - were frequently bypassed. This research found managing expectations is crucial, as lack of work opportunities following vocational training interventions or lack of participation in decision-making processes following political awareness raising may exacerbate youth frustrations, thereby driving rather than mitigating conflict and alienation.

In collecting data, particular attention was paid to gender and violence issues affecting young people across the four countries. The intersection between violence and gender roles was clearly identified as having a major impact on young people's lives, both in terms of being subjected to violence and participating in committing violent acts. This was not limited to gender binaries that associate girls/women as victims and boys/men as perpetrators of violence and which varied across contexts.
Concluding Reflections, Recommendations and Ways Forward

Finally, we connect the prior analysis to the 4Rs analytical framework to clarify education’s potential and limitations in relation to supporting the socio-cultural, political and economic dimensions of youth agency – and the intersections between these (see chapter 5). Our recommendations include:

1. Within policies of national governments and (international) civil society organisations alike, there is a need for more nuanced framings of youth, to acknowledge and respond to:
   1. a more refined and context-specific understanding that sees youth as agents of peacebuilding, and not merely as a threat
   2. the complex nature of youth peacebuilding agency, including socio-cultural, political and economic dimensions of youth empowerment;
   3. the multi-scalar nature of youth engagement and potential.

2. The need for national governments to develop more effective, coherent policy and institutional frameworks to address youth needs in relation to the economic, political, cultural and social dimensions of their agency.

3. A further exploration is needed to understand how and why (formal and non-formal) education policy and programming implicitly or explicitly focus on addressing peacebuilding, and in what ways theories of change include or exclude aspects of redistribution, recognition, representation and reconciliation.
Youth respondents call for more context-specific, needs-based and holistic education opportunities, both within formal and non-formal education programming. This would require:

1. Locally-embedded needs-based analysis and approaches to overcome mismatches between intervention rhetoric and reality;
2. Addressing discrepancies between youth priorities for peacebuilding and those of (non-formal) education interventions;
3. More diverse and critical pedagogies applied to the teaching of history;
4. More inclusive language of instruction policies that allow for diverse identities and learning needs;
5. Gender-responsive approaches to enhance equal educational/career opportunities for male and female students and teachers, and gender-transformative approaches to enhance relevance/appropriateness of educational content.

Considering the overall rather negative experience of youth respondents with the ways in which formal education fails to support their (socio-cultural, political and economic/livelihoods) needs, considerable reform efforts are needed. Particularly important areas for reform include:

1. Ensuring equal resources to ensure safe and sustainable learning environments for female and male learners and teachers;
2. Better connection with the labour market and improved provision of vocational education;
3. More diverse and critical pedagogies applied to the teaching of history;
4. More inclusive language of instruction policies that allow for diverse identities and learning needs;
5. Gender-responsive approaches to enhance equal educational/career opportunities for male and female students and teachers, and gender-transformative approaches to enhance relevance/appropriateness of educational content.

Finally, the above recommendations illustrate a gap in knowledge and a dearth of systematic evaluation of both short and longer-term impact of formal and non-formal education on the lives and choices of young people in conflict-affected contexts. Future academic research and evaluative studies need to further explore the complexities listed above.
The Research Consortium on Education and Peacebuilding

Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR), University of Amsterdam
The AISSR Programme Group Governance and Inclusive Development (http://aissr.uva.nl/programmegroups/item/governance-and-inclusive-development.html) consists of an interdisciplinary team of researchers focusing on issues relating to global and local issues of governance and development. The Research Cluster Governance of Education, Development and Social Justice focuses on multilevel politics of education and development, with a specific focus on processes of peacebuilding in relation to socio-economic, political and cultural (in)justices. The research group since 2006 has maintained a particular research focus on education, conflict and peacebuilding, as part of its co-funded ‘IS Academie’ research project with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Centre for International Education, University of Sussex
The Centre for International Education (CIE) (www.sussex.ac.uk/education/cie) was founded in 1989 on the premise that education is a basic human right that lies at the heart of development processes aimed at social justice, equity, social and civic participation, improved wellbeing, health, economic growth and poverty reduction. It is recognised as one of the premiere research centres working on education and international development in Europe. The Centre has also secured a prestigious UK ESRC/DFID grant to carry out research on the Role of Teachers in Peacebuilding in Conflict Affected Contexts, which aligns directly with the research strategy of the PBEA programme and will form part of the broader research partnership.

UNESCO Centre at Ulster University
Established in 2002 the UNESCO Centre (www.unescocentre.ulster.ac.uk) at the University of Ulster provides specialist expertise in education, conflict and international development. It builds on a strong track record of research and policy analysis related to education and conflict in Northern Ireland. Over the past ten years the UNESCO Centre has increasingly used this expertise in international development contexts, working with DFID, GIZ, Norad, Save the Children, UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank, providing research on education and social cohesion, the role of education in reconciliation and analysis of aid to education in fragile and conflict affected situations.

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