

## COVID-19 and Peacebuilding in Africa: Youth, Resilience and Innovation Options



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### Executive summary

This Policy and Practice Brief (PPB) draws extensively from the rich online conversations which attracted almost 200 youth peacebuilders from different parts of Africa, organised by the African Union (AU) Youth for Peace (Y4P) programme and UNESCO-International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa (UNESCO-IICBA) and, with additional assistance from the GIZ AU-APSA Programme. The two-part webinar series was titled '*Mobilising Resilience during and after COVID-19: A peer-to-peer experience sharing among youth peacebuilders in Africa*'. It provides some key messages from the discussions that took place, with particular focus on what resilience means to young peacebuilders; how they are mobilising resilience in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic; and, the policy implications of the options they choose for the youth, peace and security (YPS) agenda in Africa. It also highlights the role of the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC)-commissioned report on A Study on the Roles and Contributions of Youth to Peace and Security in Africa and AU Continental Framework on Youth, Peace and Security to contribute to the YPS agenda.

## Introduction

There has been a continuous increase in the involvement of youth in peace and security in Africa, especially since the African Union (AU) inaugurated its Youth for Peace (Africa) Program (Y4P) in November 2018. The Y4P sets out to mainstream youth into the continent's peace and security agenda.<sup>1</sup> Across the continent, young peacebuilders have remained resilient in their contributions to peace and security, including in the face of the current COVID-19 pandemic that has changed the dynamics of human security globally. In Africa, the weak socio-economic outlook for states and citizens has been further exacerbated due to the negative impacts of the pandemic, with no indications of when the tide will be reversed or stemmed. Significantly, COVID-19 has not only made the disparities in security indices that are widely acknowledged to be root causes of conflicts in Africa more obvious, but has also revealed how health issues are intricately interwoven with peace and security and vice-versa.



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Africa's young peacebuilders have recognised the intersection between peace and security, on the one hand, and the health pandemic on the other, and are responding in innovative ways to ameliorate the multiplier impacts in their communities. While some of them are strictly adhering to the 'social distancing' imperatives of the pandemic and biding their time for the pandemic to pass so they can return to their core peacebuilding mandates, others have adapted themselves to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19. Those already mobilising adaptive measures, in particular, are in two categories: one group is responding to the pandemic as a threat to peace and security while

the other is responding directly to the pandemic as a health issue. Irrespective of the categories that the youth and their networks belong to, the common denominator is the resilience and innovations they are mobilising in order to remain relevant in, and to add value to Africa's peace and security efforts during and after the worst of the current pandemic is over.

## 1. Resilience: Perceptions from young peacebuilders

Resilience in the context of adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic was aptly described as 'the ability of a group or an individual to recover from or adjust to the disruption or damage caused by a chronic and unanticipated challenge.'<sup>2</sup> With particular regard to youth, resilience was defined as the 'the ability of young men and women to cope, adapt and reorganise.' Two questions immediately arise from these definitions. Firstly, how are young peacebuilders coping, adapting and reorganising in the face of the pandemic? Secondly, how might they recover from the impacts of the pandemic or adjust to its adverse effects, in order to continue their peacebuilding efforts?

Regarding the first question, young peacebuilders are either responding to the pandemic primarily as a health threat or seeking to address its myriad peace and security implications. In essence, while the activities that youth peacebuilders are engaging in may be similar in some instances, the rationale and the expected outcomes differ. Those that are responding to COVID-19 as strictly a health issue are primarily interested in contributing to contain the spread of the pandemic. Those that continue to engage in the broader peace and security spectrum are carrying out activities to mitigate the impact the pandemic could have such as reducing the possibility of violence by citizens protesting against lockdown and other restrictive measures imposed by their governments. This is instructive against the backdrop of increasing attacks by restive groups, a surge in crime rates as well as attacks on vulnerable groups, particularly sexual and Gender-Based Violence (GBV). Indeed, the statistics on attacks on women and young girls during the pandemic indicate a significant and disturbing increase in reported incidences of domestic violence and rape. The activities of young peacebuilders cover a wide range of themes that

touch on humanitarian, advocacy and activism, research, innovations, among others.

The uncertainty of the long-term impacts the pandemic will wreak on the world is the question of what life will become. Will there be life ‘after’ or ‘with’ COVID-19? The former suggests a scenario where the pandemic is effectively dealt with and life returns to *status quo ante* of normalcy while the latter refers to the start of a ‘new normal’ in which the current climate becomes the daily reality. In both scenarios, the tough question is: what will become of youth peacebuilders and their activities in the peace and security arena? This is not only essential but necessary if the continent is to ‘silence the guns’ and achieve the ‘Africa we want’ promise. In addition, how might youth peacebuilders recover from the adverse impacts of the pandemic and adjust to its long-term impacts as part of their peacebuilding initiatives, moving forward? The answer to these pertinent questions, and more, featured prominently in the discussions among participants during the two-part webinar.

## 2. Youth Activities during the Pandemic<sup>3</sup>

African youths have always been, formally or informally, part of the continent’s response to peace and security challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted yet other positive and inherent characteristics of African youth which challenge the negative stereotypes that are synonymous with social disruption and are harbingers of violence. Not only have a large proportion of African youth peacebuilders shown that they are inherently productive, the pandemic has also revealed that they are highly resilient and innovative with the ability to adapt and respond to threats, including those with still unknown characteristics and repercussions, such as COVID-19.

Young peacebuilders’ activities in the COVID-19 era cut across health, political, social and economic issues, human rights, sexual and reproductive rights, to name a few. A salient factor, irrespective of the area of response, is that many of the activities youth peacebuilders are embarking on are motivated by peace and security imperatives, particularly conflict prevention. Christian Achaleke, the National Coordinator of the Local Youth Corner, LOYOC, was unequivocal in this regard when he posited that the COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated existing and new drivers of

conflicts like unemployment, fake news and dis/misinformation.

The activities of the LOYOC during the pandemic exemplifies one key aspect of youth resilience in different parts of Africa: the ability to cope, adapt and respond. The group, for instance, has identified and exploited business opportunities that the pandemic has offered. Under its ‘*Prison-preneurs*’ program, for instance, LOYOC is actively engaged in the building capacity of prison inmates and ex-convicts to produce COVID-19 essentials such as soaps, face masks, sanitisers and protective gear. One of the objectives of this program is to ensure that opportunities for economic sustenance are available to ex-convicts and inmates alike in order to prevent or minimise the risk of them returning to lives of crime which has negative repercussions for peace and security. Concurrently, the group also mobilises their peer group members who are young professionals in different fields (e.g. epidemiology and social work) to produce over 20 000 homemade hand sanitizers under its ‘Operation 1 Person 1 Hand Sanitizer’ campaign.<sup>4</sup>

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Alongside the production and distribution of these basic necessities, the group also continued with its advocacy mandate; broadening it to include messages in local languages on preventing the spread of COVID-19 and using an established network of contacts to reach far and wide across the country. In many ways, therefore, the LOYOC exemplifies the resilience of youth organisations that have been able to ‘cope, adapt and reorganise’ based on the exigencies of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Nigeria, the *Almajiri* Child Rights Initiative, ACRI, in partnership with the Universal Basic Education (UBE), runs a reintegration program for *Almajiri* (street) children in Northern Nigeria. Based on

current estimates, out of the country's total of 13.2 million out-of-school children, 69% are from Northern Nigeria.<sup>5</sup> Although the programme had been ongoing before COVID-19, the pandemic provided an opportunity for the organisation to ramp up support for the initiative, especially from state governments in the three northern geopolitical zones: Northeast, Northcentral and the Northwest.<sup>6</sup> Although the recent decisive action taken by several of the state governments in those places was premised on COVID-19 related health risks and implications, the ACRI took advantage of it to upscale the repatriation of the kids to their parents as well as provide formal schooling and other vocational training opportunities. In essence, the organisation contributed to mitigating the spread of the pandemic while sticking to, and achieving, their primary goals of improving social inclusion of vulnerable children living on the streets across Northern Nigeria.<sup>7</sup>



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In Kenya, the pandemic and its peculiar impacts on the more vulnerable populations has precipitated a rethink on social relations, its contradictions and failures. The pandemic, according to Wevyn Muganda, is “an act of injustice” in the way it accentuates and worsens the dire situation of those that are already extremely poor and vulnerable. Youth peacebuilders seize the current moment not only to provide succour to those currently subsisting at the fringes of society through the provision of essential daily needs they require to cushion the spread of the pandemic but to also begin to advocate for more socially equitable public health policies and legislation.

In Egypt, the pandemic is also not hindering the UN Major Group for Children and Youth in carrying out their mandate to advocate for increased youth participation in the policy space including the design, implementation, follow-up and review of

policies, with emphasis on information exchange and experience sharing. Rather than deter them, the pandemic has revealed the potency in broad-based participation in policymaking as COVID-19 has further highlighted how limited participation contributes to the enactment of legislations and policies that further accentuates socio-economic disparities.

From Lesotho, there were reports of the use of heavily armed security agencies to enforce the lockdown in rural areas, a situation which coincided with the increase of GBV in rural areas. With the restrictions came the threat of serious economic repercussions as farmers were denied access to their farms. This provoked the need to negotiate with the parliament, and sensitisation in the rural areas on sexual and reproductive health, in order to mitigate the situation. The sensitization program included shepherds, and it engaged both genders (male and female) in the areas of respecting each other's rights, family planning, bodily autonomy, and reproductive rights. Furthermore, there was a constant supply of family planning commodities. Unfortunately, most women are unable to plan their pregnancy. Because of the lack of adequate healthcare, maternal death is high and needs to be addressed. In some areas, women have to travel six hours on foot to get medical help. Overall, the pandemic affected rural areas in terms of food production (farming), sexual and reproductive rights, and GBV. The key take, however, is that it led to youth groups perceiving the need to constantly engage governments; and doing so with the intention of mitigating the challenges highlighted above with respect to rural areas.

Finally, the security implications of enforcing the COVID-19 lockdown have also gained the attention of African youth peacebuilders. Two broad trends are most evident in this regard; first, is the safety of the most vulnerable social categories— especially women and young girls – from gender and sexual-based violence; and second, the use of excessive force by state security forces to enforce curfews and other lockdown directives.

### **3. Contextualizing youth resilience in the face of COVID-19**

In multiple ways, COVID-19 is adversely challenging every aspect of human relations, particularly with regard to physical contact. However, it is also

providing the opportunity to have a critical think on youth-society relations, and to press the reset button with regard to what it should look and feel like in the near future. Clearly, the outbreak has brought to the fore the important roles that young people play in in their communities and beyond but also the difficult situations they have to contend with and overcome to do so. The study on the roles and contributions of youth to peace and security in Africa mandated by the AU-PSC identified some of these hindrances.<sup>8</sup> They include resource constraints – human, financial, technical; inadequate government support; and, limited societal trust in young people amongst others. With the pandemic, not only do young people have to surmount these challenges but also those that are consequences of COVID-19, such as the risk of being infected with the disease and other health repercussions, including possible death; restricted movement due to lockdown as well as the risk of being harassed by security agents enforcing the restrictions; and financial sacrifices.

Undoubtedly, youth peacebuilders who are facing the pandemic head-on to bring succour to the less privileged in their communities are themselves in clear danger of contracting the disease. Already, several youth peacebuilders have contracted the disease in the course of their frontline engagement in containing the pandemic while some have paid the ultimate sacrifice of death. In much the same way, they should not be recorded as mere statistics lost to the pandemic but recognized and immortalized as heroes who paid the ultimate sacrifice in service to others and to humanity. In many parts of the continent, the highhandedness of security officials in enforcing the lockdown has put young people, in general, at the receiving end of the authoritarian excesses of the state, particularly young women who now more than ever are at high risk of physical, emotional, sexual and psychosocial abuses. Young peacebuilders choosing to contend with these aggravated risks within their own immediate communities or elsewhere are themselves drawn into life-threatening encounters for a cause they believe in. It is also important to note that because many of them now find it difficult to engage in their regular jobs and income-earning enterprises due to the lockdown, funding their social campaigns would more likely than not put heavier toll on their finances.

Key feedback from youth peacebuilders during the two webinars was that the pandemic has provided them with the solemnity to reflect on pertinent issues affecting society generally, and youth roles and contributions to peace and security in Africa, in particular. They contended, for instance, that while fake news is already considered a malaise to society during this period, it is even more dangerous without any concrete medical breakthrough to arrest the spread of the disease and its fatal consequences.

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This situation has ‘forced’ the majority of the youth networks around the continent to step up advocacy on themes related to the pandemic alongside their humanitarian initiatives. They do so in order to ensure that the dangers of the disease are known and that myths are separated from facts particularly among the large illiterate populations that are not necessarily able to follow and understand government restrictions. The period of the pandemic has also been considered a time for young peacebuilders to embrace multi-sectoral and interdisciplinary approaches to peacebuilding rather than act alone in silos. They are, as such, breaking away from the traditional ways of working and promoting new innovations and ideas to address the plethora of challenges posed by COVID-19 as well as other societal problems that the pandemic has pushed to the fore. The issue of youth agency, that has been on various agendas for many decades, is now receiving more attention among young peacebuilders who are insisting that young people should be trusted and enabled to lend their voices to pertinent societal matters, including peace and security.

Certainly, there is no better time than now to reflect on what the likely future for young peacebuilders is going to be, with respect to their roles and

contributions to Africa's peace and security. Since there is a lot of uncertainty on the long-term impact of COVID-19, whatever alternative futures for youth are envisaged, can only be premised on the changes that have already occurred or are taking place within the youth peacebuilding sector. In the first instance, social distancing may be the primary mitigating step in the fight against the pandemic but no one can tell how long this can be sustained as people adapt to working remotely. Young peacebuilders are not left out of this as they are also becoming more active than ever on social media and other electronic outlets; whether organising or participating in virtual meetings. It is debatable, of course, as to whether these methods could enable them to reach their targets more quickly and effectively given, among others, the relatively limited Internet penetration in Africa and the high costs of smart phones, data and power supply. It will also be challenging for young peacebuilders who are (mostly) grassroots or community-based to effectively perform as they did before the outbreak of COVID-19. It is not beyond contemplation, as some of what they are currently doing has vividly demonstrated that a blend of resilience and innovation may see them through or even enable them to surpass previous achievements.

Second, the pandemic may yet present the opportunity young people require to rethink and redefine their relationship with the state and their communities. Already, state responses in many parts of the continent have been roundly criticized for not acting quickly and doing enough to assist vulnerable social groups such as the aged, physically challenged, displaced persons and refugees as well as young people themselves in terms of delivering economic relief packages such as food and protective gear. Across Africa, youth networks have stepped up to help; and in some cases, their modest efforts make a lot of qualitative difference for beneficiaries. Perhaps what they need to keep in mind and do is to be more strategic in drawing attention to and highlighting their roles and contributions or risk under-appreciation from power holders and gatekeepers of narratives accustomed to labelling them as 'troublesome' youth. While the corporate/business community is generally lauded for corporate social responsibility by state and citizens and frontline

healthcare workers are being appreciated for their contributions, young peoples' sacrifices are still not fully acknowledged and appreciated. What this implies is that if they are able to successfully redefine their relationships with the state and society, the terms of engagement will change with better levels of trust and willingness to promote the YPS agenda.



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#### **4. Conclusion**

Accounting for Africa's response to COVID-19 without adequate cognisance of the role and contributions of its young people who, in most countries, constitute an average of 60% of population, is incomplete. Youth peacebuilders across the continent have seized the opportunity, directly or otherwise, to showcase the positive, valuable and essential roles they play in society. Their altruistic responses to the pandemic, as mirrored by their involvements in advocacy and communication, provision of food and medical supplies to the less privileged and vulnerable, producing and distributing anti-COVID-19 essentials such as hand sanitizers and soaps, amongst others, illustrate the inherent positive value they possess and contribute to society. Putting themselves at the forefront of ongoing interventions, irrespective of the dangers and negative consequences of COVID-19, puts them on a similar pedestal as the frontline healthcare workers during the pandemic and soldiers in wartime. This brief highlights only a small sample of youth responses to the current pandemic, indicative of the multiple resilient, innovative and adaptation options they are involved in.

What is perhaps more remarkable is that despite the commendable contributions of youth to peace

and security and society generally, young peacebuilders are insisting, rightly, that they should be getting adequate support from their governments to enable them to do more. It can only be imagined what youth and their networks would be able to achieve if the environment were more conducive – from appropriate policies, laws and positive public mindsets towards them. It is important to note, in this regard, that the AU PSC-mandated study on the roles and contributions of youth to peace and security in Africa as well as the Continental Framework on YPS<sup>9</sup> are significant steps in the right direction. While the study highlights hindrances to the optimal contributions of youth and makes recommendations to

policymakers at continental, regional and national levels on requisite steps to take to promote the YPS agenda, the Continental Framework on YPS (and its 10-year implementation plan) provides both normative and practical steps to mainstream and promote youth participation in peacebuilding across its five pillars, namely: participation, prevention, protection, partnership and co-ordination as well as disengagement and re-integration. The fact that the AU and RECs/RMs collaborated closely with youth groups across the continent to develop these documents reflects the general willingness on the part of policy-making institutions to advance Africa's YPS agenda in the short and long term. 🌍

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### Endnotes

- 1 Rhuks Ako, Mfrekeobong Ukpanah, Orit Ibrahim and Hannah Mamo, 'Mainstreaming youth into AU's peace and security agenda', ISS Policy Brief 144 | May 2020.
- 2 This definition was offered by Hubert Kinkoh of the African Leadership Centre in Nairobi, who served as panel presenter during the second webinar held on 16 June 2020.
- 3 The details in this section are derived from the panel and plenary discussions from both webinars and verified through monitoring of media sources.
- 4 It is reported that the product has been used by about 50 000 people in around 70 communities.
- 5 See, 'The Almajiri Situation' in <[www.reliefweb.int](http://www.reliefweb.int)> posted on 14 May 2020. Accessed on 4 July 2020.
- 6 Since the relocation and resettlement program started, about 7–8 million children have been taken off the streets.
- 7 The children are often used to perpetrate violence and social mayhem by politicians and organised crime networks.
- 8 African Union Commission, 2020. The Roles and Contributions of Youth to Peace and Security in Africa. <<https://www.peaceau.org/uploads/a-study-on-the-roles-and-contributions-of-youth-to-peace-and-security-in-africa-17-sept-2020.pdf>>
- 9 African Union Commission, 2020. Continental Framework for Youth, Peace and Security. <<https://au.int/en/documents/20200821/continental-framework-youth-peace-and-security>>

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