



SAMUEL CENTRE
FOR SOCIAL
CONNECTEDNESS



**Young Changemakers,
Community Well-being, and Connectedness**
The Role of Youth-Led Initiatives in Advancing Social
Connectedness: A Qualitative Study

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Peace First continues to amplify the work of young changemakers around the world, providing them with critical support to address various forms of injustices across their communities. This qualitative study “Young Changemakers Community Well-Being and Connectedness” explores the collective community impact made by these youth-led social change projects, with a particular focus on community well-being and social connectedness. The findings from the study are conceptualized through the lens and framing of Peace First’s core values (the 3 Cs) – Courage, Compassion, and Collaboration. Among other insightful learning, the study finds that youth-led initiatives are sparking difficult conversations and action around sensitive social issues, successfully leveraging creative and artistic forms of expression to bring diverse community members together, modeling inclusive ways of working with persons who are typically on the margins of their communities, and developing meaningful connections with diverse stakeholders and allies.

Three recommendations also emerge from the study, to further strengthen the impact of young changemakers. First, youth-serving organizations can support capacity building around monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and impact measurement. Secondly, tailored support needs to be offered to young leaders who are struggling with bureaucratic institutions and relating with difficult stakeholders. Finally, in addition to showcasing success stories, youth-serving organizations need to be deliberate about encouraging young changemakers to share their challenges as they design and implement their social change initiatives.

This study reveals the inadequacy of numbers and traditional M&E tools to capture the different dimensions of impact made by youth-led initiatives. Looking forward, future research and programmatic interventions should focus on co-creating and developing new tools and metrics for young changemakers to understand and describe their impact beyond numbers.

Terminology

In this report:

- **“Youth”** and **“Young People”** refer to individuals between 13-25 years, as defined by Peace First.
- **“Young Changemaker”** refers to any young person who is leading, co-leading or supporting a social change project. The term is used interchangeably with **“Young Leader”**.
- **“Social Connectedness”** refers to the ability for everyone (regardless of age, race, ability, gender, class, sexual orientation or other identity) “to be valued, seen and heard...where solidarity, trust and cooperation pave the way for inter and intra community bonds” as defined by the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness.

2. INTRODUCTION

Youth-led social action is often presumed to primarily target young people, as opposed to their wider communities. This is far from the current reality.

Programmatic learning on approaches to youth-led organizing has revealed that young people are looking beyond themselves and mostly “organizing to create supportive and empowering environments so that their peers, families and communities can thrive.”¹ Young people also continue to demonstrate that their social action efforts are rooted in their socio-political contexts. While personal growth is a critical motivation for them, community transformation is an equally compelling reason to organize.² This is particularly evident in the dynamic ways that young people have stepped up in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, providing relevant services to hard-to-reach community members, disseminating accurate information about the pandemic, and advocating for the most vulnerable individuals.³

For nearly three decades, Peace First has supported thousands of young people (ages 13-25) to tackle various forms of injustices across their communities by providing them with training, mentors and funding.⁴ Against the backdrop of these efforts, this research project sought to understand more about the collective impact of youth-led initiatives. In particular, this study explored the question: What role do youth-led initiatives play in promoting a community’s well-being and social connectedness?

¹ Skinner and French, “Youth-Led Community Organizing: Values-Driven Work,” 6.

² Baker, “Fostering a Critical Consciousness for Social and Political Change.”

³ Women Deliver, “10 Ways Young People Are Leading the Way Against COVID-19 – Women Deliver.”

⁴ Peace First, “What We Do | Peace First.”

In what follows, this report first presents a background discussion on the impact of youth-led initiatives and a brief overview of the research framework, key questions, methodology and limitations. Subsequently, the report unpacks the key findings of the qualitative study through an analysis of relevant primary and secondary data. Drawing from these findings, key recommendations for Peace First and other youth-serving organizations are then proposed to enable them to support young changemakers better as they make an impact across their communities. Before concluding, the report also highlights the implications of the key findings for future research, programmatic action, and youth-led social change.

2.1 *Background*

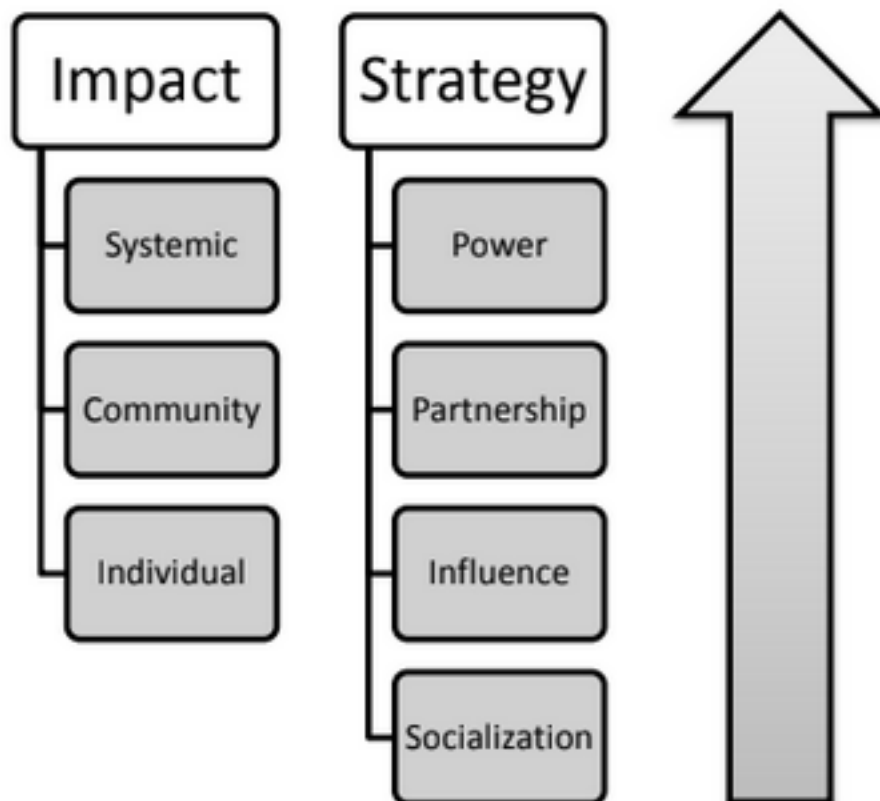


Figure 1: Hierarchy of Impact and Strategy Types

Generally, three major spheres of impact by youth-led social initiatives have emerged – individual, community or inter-organizational and systemic levels of impact through strategies such as influence, partnership and socialization.⁵ The above figure⁶ highlights the hierarchy of impact and strategies adopted by youth-led organizations, from the highest (top) to the lowest level (bottom). Notably, the evaluation of youth-led initiatives has focused mainly on the lowest level – the “individual” sphere, with impact dominantly framed in terms of the numbers of individuals reached, trainings delivered, knowledge and skills gained, access to resources, improved confidence/self-esteem, and individual development of young people.⁷ Many youth-serving organizations are also quick to publicly demonstrate the sustained impact of community involvement in the lives of young people themselves, but hardly measure success in terms of community impact and/or the unique dividends of youth-led social action.⁸

While recognizing that the concept of “impact” is “slippery, highly subjective and difficult to consistently define,”⁹ there is a need to dig deeper into the community-level impact of youth-led initiatives. This focus on community impact is not intended to “diminish the importance of youth participation for its own sake.”¹⁰ Rather, increased awareness of the unique contribution of young people to advancing the well being of local communities will present a more holistic picture

⁵ Clarke and Dougherty, “Youth-Led Social Entrepreneurship.”

⁶ Ho, “Mapping Youth-Led Engagement,” 62.

⁷ Brennan, Barnett, and Lesmeister, “Enhancing Local Capacity and Youth Involvement in the Community Development Process”; Christens and Kirshner, “Taking Stock of Youth Organizing”; Mauto, “Experiences and Lessons from the Urban Youth Fund Grantees in Africa and Asia”; Mauto et al., “Lessons and Experiences from the Urban Youth Fund”; Texas School Safety Centre, “The Positive Effects of Youth Community Engagement | Texas School Safety Center”; Mauto, “Youth-Led Economic Empowerment: Lessons from the Urban Youth”; Adams and Coe, “Youth Led Change in the UK - Understanding the Landscape and the Opportunities.”

⁸ Tolman et al., *Youth Acts, Community Impacts*.

⁹ Ho, “Mapping Youth-Led Engagement,” 97.

¹⁰ Tolman et al., *Youth Acts, Community Impacts*, 23.

of their concerted efforts for social change. In particular, as the need for effective social cohesion strategies becomes even more glaring within and across communities,¹¹ understanding the extent to which young people support belonging, inclusion, and participation is critical. This has the potential to erase stereotypes of young people as troublemakers, high-risk, delinquent and up to no good,¹² and to challenge widespread ‘adultist’ attitudes that also exist within social justice movements.¹³ Clarity around the collective community benefits of youth-led initiatives will also present fresh ways of defining the success of these initiatives beyond individual-level impact.

2.2 Research Framework & Key Questions

In addition to a deeper commitment to action, young people supported by Peace First have also reported enhanced “courage, compassion and collaboration” as a result of their change-making experience. For Peace First, these three values (the 3 Cs) define peacemakers and are at the heart of peace-making projects.¹⁴ They are described as follows:¹⁵

Courage: “Taking personal risks to help others, believing that if one’s community is going to get better one must act.”

Compassion: “Crossing boundaries to understand others’ perspectives and needs, believing in the inherent worth of others, and acting to include others in solutions.”

¹¹ Thomas, “Bridging Social Boundaries and Building Social Connectedness.”

¹² Porfilio and Gorlewski, “Promoting Active Citizenship through the Arts and Youth”; Bodiford, “Youth-Led Dialogues for Positive Change”; Mauto, “Youth-Led Economic Empowerment: Lessons from the Urban Youth”; Baker, “Fostering a Critical Consciousness for Social and Political Change.”

¹³ Mama Cash and FRIDA, The Young Feminist Fund, “Girls to the Front,” October 2018.

¹⁴ Peace First, “What We Do | Peace First.”

¹⁵ Peace First.

Collaboration: “Moving others to create lasting change, believing in one’s ability to make a difference, and working with others to solve problems without violence.”

This research project utilized the above 3Cs framework to move beyond the established evidence of individual impact in order to understand the unique difference that youth-led projects make across communities, with particular emphasis on social connectedness. Within the three domains of this framework, the following key questions were considered:

Courage

- What issues and interventions are young people prioritizing for social action across their communities? From these priorities, what might we learn about the collective community impact that youth-led projects make?
- What are the unique ways through which young people take a stand on the issues important to them within their communities?
- What might we learn about young people’s risk-taking and perseverance in their changemaking efforts at the grassroots?
- How does having young people (specifically) lead community work impact their communities? What are the standout roles that young people play?

Compassion

- What unique tools and/or processes do young people adopt to understand different forms of injustices across their communities?
- How do youth-led initiatives (including those supported by Peace First) bridge existing divides and advance community well being, belonging and engagement?

- To what extent do young people’s social action projects include the voices and perspectives of “unlikely allies” and other individuals living on the margins within their communities?

Collaboration

- In what unique ways do youth-led initiatives meaningfully engage young people across their diverse communities?
- Which community stakeholders do youth-led initiatives co-create change with? What forms of alliances and partnerships do young changemakers build within their communities?
- To what extents do youth-led social change initiatives cut across intersecting issues/themes and SDGs?

2.3 Research Methodology

To answer the key questions identified above, the study adopted a qualitative approach, and was centered on a single case study, Peace First, for three main reasons. First, Peace First designed the study in collaboration with the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness in order to fill some knowledge gaps about the impact of the youth-led initiatives that Peace First continues to support. As the study was centred on specific learning around the role of youth-led initiatives in advancing social connectedness, zooming in on a single case study was critical. The advantage of this approach was that it enabled me to explore the nuances of youth-led work in a deeper way by asking “how” and “why” in addition to exploring “what” the dimensions of impact are. Also, there were rich qualitative insights to draw from Peace First’s nearly three-decade work in resourcing and amplifying the work of youth changemakers. Thus, this

approach was necessary, in order to “delve into things in more detail and discover things that might not have become apparent through more superficial research.”¹⁶ Thirdly, adopting a single case study approach granted me the opportunity to explore diverse forms of data, sources, and methods that were suitable for answering the key research questions.¹⁷ This contributed significantly to data validation, through triangulation.¹⁸

In carrying out this qualitative study, I drew from both primary and secondary qualitative data. First, I conducted a desk review of relevant publications and programmatic reports on the impact of youth-led initiatives. Some of the reports were obtained from my email outreach to other youth-serving organizations including Plan International and One Young World. This enabled me to identify all preliminary themes relevant to the research, and to gain insights into established evidence on the research topic. Thereafter, I reviewed the project reflections submitted by 350 young leaders within the Peace First global community over the past year. This was a significant pool of data for understanding the concept of “community impact” from the first-hand perspective of young leaders supported by Peace First.

Following this, I went on to conduct a focus group discussion with seven Peace First Fellows-In-Residence that work with Peace First to directly mobilize and support young leaders within their respective regions. I also conducted individual interviews with four young people from Kenya, Lebanon, Nigeria, and United Kingdom who have completed social change projects (supported by

¹⁶ Denscombe, *Good Research Guide*, 30–31.

¹⁷ Denscombe, 31.

¹⁸ Denscombe, 37.

Peace First) in the past year. These projects focused on child nutrition and subsistence agriculture, support for refugees and individuals with precarious immigration status, and men/boys' engagement in gender-based violence prevention and recycling. I opted for a focus group discussion and interviews with fellows and young leaders to enable me to contextualize the insights from the project reflections and to obtain more in-depth information from individuals who are "key players in the field."¹⁹ Notably, a focus group discussion was appropriate for Fellows-In-Residence who are familiar with each other and have had considerable experience working together. On the other hand, individual interviews were more suitable for young leaders, enabling them to share their perspectives in confidence – without the interplay of power dynamics that often exists between young people and organizations/individuals that support their work.

2.4 Ethics & Limitations

All interviews and the focus group discussion were conducted virtually via Zoom (a low-cost, easy-to-use, and secure virtual meeting platform) in order to reach respondents regardless of their physical location. The protection of all respondents' personal information was also prioritized. Following all respondents' written and oral consent, the focus group discussion and interviews were recorded securely in the cloud and subsequently transcribed for ease of reference. While conducting the individual interviews with young leaders, I was particularly conscious of my positionality as both a researcher and a founder of a youth-led organization. Even though my experience in youth-led social action

¹⁹ Denscombe, 165.

made me quite relatable to the respondents, I took great care to shield my personal perspectives on the questions asked in order to prevent biased responses.

As with any study, this research project was not without a few limitations. First, adopting a single case study approach means that this study is less likely to sustain credible generalized findings.²⁰ This is a trade-off that was necessary to make, given that the study was focused on key learning around young leaders' impact within the specific context of Peace First's work. Also, due to the fixed time frame for the research project, it was not possible to speak directly to young people across all regions represented within the Peace First global community. In the absence of time and resources to schedule more interviews, I reviewed all project reflections submitted by young people from every region, over the past year. This enabled me to effectively center the first-hand perspectives of young people in the study.

3. ISSUE, EVIDENCE & KEY FINDINGS

3.1 COURAGE

3.1.1 Championing Mindset Shifts

“The campaign was really about changing attitudes and bringing FGM practices that are happening silently in the community to light. I feel that it achieved that, the FGM practices common in our community were identified and victims and perpetrators had a platform to discuss and map ways forward. To the participants and the people that the campaign reached, we can say attitudes are changed and the silent injustice is known.”

²⁰ George, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, 22.

– *Reflections from a Young Leader (Zimbabwe)*

The study established that youth-led initiatives are typically focused on changing the attitudes and perspectives of members of their communities. Young leaders are keen to leverage on their informal networks and micro spheres of influence to drive strategic awareness-raising, particularly on issues that are often regarded as sensitive or taboo, such as child, early, and forced marriages, racial profiling, female genital mutilation. Other issues commonly addressed by youth-led initiatives include substance abuse, environmental degradation, and integration of refugees in host communities. To enable these mindset shifts, young leaders are facilitating conversations with marginalized communities (e.g. LGBTQI and refugee communities) and inspiring members of their community to take action. These laudable youth-led efforts also contribute to combatting adultism - an assumed inferiority of young people and bias towards adults, and negative stereotypes about young people.

Even though young people mostly refer to the impact of their social change projects in terms of the number of individuals reached, skills and knowledge disseminated, and economic opportunities created, the study revealed that building trust, promoting openness, and enabling a sense of belonging within their communities are regarded as valuable forms of impact. Especially within the context of COVID-19, young leaders are working hard to bridge widening gaps and to keep their communities together above all odds.

“The fear that Covid-19 instilled amongst our community resulted in people becoming more self-serving. Thus, this pandemic led to communities drifting apart, and divisions resurfaced - especially among the various socio-economic classes. Our project rekindled the sense of

belonging and togetherness that had been lost, and rebuilt valuable family relationships.”

- Reflections from a Young Leader (Pakistan)

Again, where public policies and government decisions fail to champion togetherness and belonging across their communities, young changemakers remain undeterred. They do not appear to be limited by hostile policies towards the communities that they serve, but instead, continue to pursue ‘belonging’ as a goal in itself.

“The people that we work with have faced a lot of barriers from the home office in the UK...there's a policy that the government has been implementing for a long time called the hostile environment policy, which makes the UK as hostile places possible for immigrants so that they will hopefully choose not to come here or leave. Obviously, that doesn't work. And it's also a horrible idea. But really, what we're trying to do is do the opposite of that. So make a really welcoming environment where people feel safe.”²¹

3.1.2 Leveraging Creative and Artistic Expression

“Young people are looking to me for answers...many women and girls have approached me and reached out to me, expressing how my music mirrors many of their experiences, such as pain, sadness, joy, and others. They say, —It's like you wrote my life story in your songs.”

- Eternia: 411 Initiative for Change²²

From the use of music, lyrics, and multimedia presentations to facilitate engagement in advocacy and social commentary,²³ to organizing museum exhibitions to promote empathy among thousands of teenagers in a city with strained racial dynamics,²⁴ and the use of mural painting to facilitate community

²¹ Borchardt-Hume and Abagun, Founder, "Thread Ahead," Interviewed by Olaoluwa Abagun, Online.

²² Porfilio and Gorlewski, "Promoting Active Citizenship through the Arts and Youth," 58.

²³ Porfilio and Gorlewski, "Promoting Active Citizenship through the Arts and Youth."

²⁴ Zeylikman et al., "Where Did We Go Right (and Wrong)?"

healing after a gruesome murder,²⁵ young people have continued to utilize art and other forms of creative expression to engage other young people as well as their broader communities. Young feminist activists have increasingly adopted a practice known as ‘Artivism,’ raising awareness and advocating for change through music, paintings, and theatre.²⁶ Youth-led peacebuilding projects have also successfully employed animation, cartoon strips, photo exhibitions, and multicultural musical shows to raise awareness on inter-religious discrimination and challenge stereotypes about immigrants within their communities.²⁷

Artistic expression in and of itself has been described as “part of an evolutionary mechanism for creating and maintaining social ties or feelings of connectedness.”²⁸ Arts-based programming has also been linked to increased social and emotional well-being, with positive effects on mental health and social inclusion.²⁹ As exemplified above, youth-led initiatives continue to demonstrate mastery in the use of theatre, videography, art carnivals, and other forms of artistic expression to facilitate hard conversations, roll back social isolation, and bring together individuals from various strata within their communities. This is a clear dividend of having young people design and drive social change projects at the grassroots.

“The participants in the project were involved in a creative process which was co-created with them. They were able to reflect upon themselves and utilize the creative space to express themselves fully, in a safe and democratic way. To be part of an engagement with other people of their age group during the pandemic and experiencing the

²⁵ Blanchet-Cohen and Cook, “The Transformative Power of Youth Grants.”

²⁶ FRIDA, The Young Feminist Fund and AWID, “Brave Creative Resilient.”

²⁷ McGill, “Evaluation of UNAOC’s Youth Solidarity Fund Projects Funded by the Government of Finland 2016 and 2017: 2016 in Nigeria, Cameroon, and the State of Palestine 2017 in Uganda, South Sudan, Morocco, India (Implemented Also in Nepal and Bhutan) and Pakistan.”

²⁸ Abrams and Van de Vyver, “Community Connectedness Through the Arts,” 60.

²⁹ Lee et al., “Journey to Hope, Self-Expression and Community Engagement.”

sense of isolation, it built resilience amongst the participants as they shared in their reflections.”

- Reflections from a Young Leader (India)

“Through Graffiti we created awareness of the social ill in our community, and residents started talking about it and even the local police started treating people with respect.”

- Reflections from a Young Leader (Kenya)

3.1.3 Virtual Community Engagement

Young people have invigorated social activism through social media and virtual platforms in general.³⁰ In overcoming the barriers to physical community engagement, youth-led initiatives have leveraged both new technology (social networks) and more traditional ones (radio) to increase their visibility and engage even more members of their communities.³¹ From Brazil to the USA, youth-led initiatives are also creating virtual learning communities to promote learning and re-learning without boundaries, especially around diversity, inclusion and cultural competency.³² This virtual approach to change making bears huge potential for connecting individuals within and across communities, especially in the current context of physical distancing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Our project is based on providing high quality education using technology. We use virtual reality, augmented reality, data science, and artificial intelligence to build an inseparable virtual educational experience for students.”

- Reflections from a Young Leader (Egypt)

3.1.4 Pushing the Boundaries of Possibilities

*“The students who are heavily involved haven’t been taken into traditional ways of thinking and organising, so they’re not constrained by the things that hold back other organisations. **They have no sense of limitation.** Lots of organisations start with resources and then think*

³⁰ McLeod, “The Efficacy of a Youth Initiative.”

³¹ Mama Cash and FRIDA, The Young Feminist Fund, “Girls to the Front,” October 2018.

³² One Young World, “One Young World Annual Impact Report 2020.”

'how is this possible'. The students start with thinking about what they want to do" [emphasis mine]."
- Jake Woodier³³

Young people “bring a level of energy and vitality that is like a breath of fresh air (or controlled hurricane) to the community,” dreaming “without the constraints that older folks bring to the table.”³⁴ This energy is manifested in the nimbleness of youth-led initiatives, which enables them to adopt quick and flexible approaches to achieving social change – often challenging the fundamental agreed notions of what is possible.³⁵ Even in times of unpredicted crisis, youth-led initiatives respond flexibly, showing immense support and solidarity for their communities in ways that matter. For instance, in Lebanon, a youth-led initiative, ‘Haven for Artists’ converted their workspace into a shelter and distributed food, clothing, and hygiene kits in the areas most affected by the Beirut blasts.³⁶ Also, despite being affected personally by the COVID-19 pandemic (including the loss of loved ones), young people continued to show up for their communities – braving the odds to provide supplies to the most underserved and serve the unreachable.

“Because two of our team members died as a result of [COVID-19]...and many of our relatives have also been affected by [COVID-19], including my brother-in-law, who recently passed away as a result of [COVID-19]...but then new TB patients began contacting us to do the work themselves...so we decided to do whatever we can, and we decided to also use other platforms to send our message to everyone.”

- *Reflections from a Young Leader (India)*

³³ Adams and Coe, “Youth Led Change in the UK - Understanding the Landscape and the Opportunities,” 14.

³⁴ Tolman et al., *Youth Acts, Community Impacts*, 46.

³⁵ Adams and Coe, “Youth Led Change in the UK - Understanding the Landscape and the Opportunities.”

³⁶ The Global Resilience Fund, “Weathering the Storm (WTS).”

Overall, in working to advance social change, youth aim for more impact and take bigger risks than they are given credit for.³⁷ They are willing to defy the odds, rise up to unprecedented challenges and tweak their strategies to accommodate urgent community needs. They are also prepared to “start anywhere,”³⁸ and to do the unconventional to respond to immediate opportunities for change making within their communities. This study also presented strong evidence that young leaders are often reviewing and adapting their projects in response to new learning. Notably, youth-led social change projects often expand their scope to reach new demographics – individuals who often fall through the cracks e.g. persons living with disabilities, refugees, and LGBTQI+ persons. In times such as this, when communities are often decrying national NGOs for “lacking responsiveness, connection and accountability,” and critiquing large charities as “too often rigid, unaccountable and distant from the people they are meant to serve,”³⁹ there is a unique role that youth-led initiatives continue to play.

“We noticed the suffering of [hearing and speech impaired] patients and breast cancer patients so we expanded the scope to include them.”

- Reflections from a Young Leader (Egypt)

3.2 COMPASSION

3.2.1 Community-Driven Learning on Injustices

“At the beginning of our interventions, the process was very focused on reaching [girls and adolescents], but along the way of the implementation...we discovered that the phenomenon of early and forced unions in girls and adolescents involves the community itself. It

³⁷ Ho, Clarke, and Dougherty, “Youth-Led Social Change.”

³⁸ Skinner and French, “Youth-Led Community Organizing: Values-Driven Work,” 8.

³⁹ Adams and Coe, “Youth Led Change in the UK - Understanding the Landscape and the Opportunities,” 7.

is a problem that, to work on it, you must mainly work not only with the girls but also with their families.”

- Reflections from a Young Leader (Argentina)

One key learning from this study is that young leaders significantly demonstrate openness to new learning and are willing to challenge their initial assumptions around social issues. In leading social change, they prioritize speaking directly to, listening to stories from, and observing community members who are most affected by the injustices that they tackle. While they also consult non-youth experts, first-hand perspectives matter the most to young leaders. One strategy used to ensure that youth-led initiatives are driven by accurate knowledge about these injustices, is the recruitment of team members with relevant lived experiences.

“We learned how important and valuable it is to include people with lived experience of the injustice in our planning and execution of the project, and we saw how this improved our visitors’ experiences of the event.”

- Reflections from a Young Leader (United Kingdom)

3.2.2 Creating Impact on the Margins

Youth-led initiatives are often focused on reaching underserved groups and individuals. As Fondo Lunaria puts it, this involves offering support to those that “nobody else wants to support,” such as individuals in isolated regions and Indigenous youth.⁴⁰ Research has also shown that young leaders often choose to work in the poorest neighborhoods in their communities to know them better and learn from them.⁴¹

“Through the project, we served a person who was neglected by his family, relatives and neighbors because of a disease. He was diagnosed with leprosy some years ago and was discarded from his

⁴⁰ Mama Cash and FRIDA, The Young Feminist Fund, “Girls to the Front,” December 2018, 19.

⁴¹ Tolman et al., *Youth Acts, Community Impacts*.

village... This information was relayed to the local ward of his home village which rescued the man to a hospital and is in the process of reinstating [him] back to his home.”
- Reflections from a Young Leader (Nepal)

Youth-led initiatives are intentional about supporting the improved integration of refugees in their host communities,⁴² and highlighting the inequalities of communities oppressed by “caste, class and social stigma.”⁴³ More specifically, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, public services have gone even farther from some traditionally marginalized groups such as transgender people, girls and young people living with disabilities, sex workers, immigrants and indigenous communities. Youth-led feminist groups have stepped up to address the cracks in social protection systems and emergency responses, reducing the unprecedented levels of isolation and violence within their communities.⁴⁴

3.2.3 Value-Driven Community Impact

“In my experience, from the last years, young people work with accountability, enthusiasm, values, ethics, responsibility and commitment.”⁴⁵

Youth-led groups are distinct from other groups working in the same communities, as they are built from young people’s personal experiences and the relevant interventions are developed based on their community’s priorities.⁴⁶ In

⁴² Mauto, “Experiences and Lessons from the Urban Youth Fund Grantees in Africa and Asia”; McGill, “Evaluation of UNAOC’s Youth Solidarity Fund Projects Funded by the Government of Finland 2016 and 2017: 2016 in Nigeria, Cameroon, and the State of Palestine 2017 in Uganda, South Sudan, Morocco, India (Implemented Also in Nepal and Bhutan) and Pakistan.”

⁴³ Mathiyazhagan, “Participatory Youth-Led Community Development,” 4.

⁴⁴ The Global Resilience Fund, “Weathering the Storm (WTS).”

⁴⁵ MacNeil, “The Challenge and Promise of Youth-Led Development,” 11.

⁴⁶ Skinner and French, “Youth-Led Community Organizing: Values-Driven Work.”

implementing social change projects to impact their communities, young people also centre love, dignity, and prioritize working with empathy, not sympathy.

“Don't look at others with eyes of pity only, but look at them with hope and encouragement.”

- Reflections from a Young Leader (Yemen)

Internally, youth-led initiatives typically adopt democratic decision-making processes, a culture of equal ownership, and a horizontal leadership structure.⁴⁷

Young leaders also look inwards, holding themselves accountable for diversity and inclusion and prioritizing the wellness of team members - modeling the kind of communities they are working to create and more wholesome ways for community members to work together. This authentic and participatory way of leading social change within communities fosters reciprocity and trustworthiness – indicators that are critical for building social connectedness.⁴⁸

“Through our volunteer program, we encourage queer/trans volunteers to develop movement-building skills by maintaining a non-hierarchical structure where volunteers vote on major organizational decisions and teams make autonomous decisions. We invite queer/trans St. Louisans to join our trainings and meetings as guest speakers or advisors, uplifting their lived experiences as expertise. We analyze our demographic makeup annually to hold ourselves accountable to our diversity/representation goals.”

- Reflections from a Young Leader (USA)

3.3 COLLABORATION

3.3.1 Allies for Change

“We've had a lot of young people do really interesting work in the US where they have to access multiple levels of support from the community...working with local government, local elected officials, forming alliances with local politicians, and then also local libraries, and

⁴⁷ FRIDA, The Young Feminist Fund and AWID, “Brave Creative Resilient”; Ventura, ““We Created That Space with Everybody””; Adams and Coe, “Youth Led Change in the UK - Understanding the Landscape and the Opportunities”; Zeylikman et al., “Where Did We Go Right (and Wrong)?”

⁴⁸ Thomas, “Bridging Social Boundaries and Building Social Connectedness.”

existing community centers and nonprofits...And I'm really impressed, just by the ways that they've been able to navigate those spaces and find interesting alliances.”

- Brennan L. (Peace First Fellow-In-Residence, US & Canada)⁴⁹

As they lead social change initiatives, young people prioritize working with diverse stakeholders, from small to large corporate organizations (including those who do not typically work with youth), community groups/NGOs, schools, and other youth-led organizations. Young people generally view collaboration as an effective way to solve challenges in the course of project implementation – from resource challenges to gaining the trust of community members. Such collaboration between young people and stakeholders often leads to meaningful connections. However, research has shown that even when the goals of adult-led and youth-led social change initiatives were largely the same, young people approached relationship development differently.⁵⁰ Rather than formal one-off meetings, youth-led initiatives encourage sustained communication, are intentional about developing relationships, and focus on building common networks.⁵¹ For them, relationships are at the core of transforming their communities and loving – “the drive to reconnect and make whole that which has become or appears fragmented,” is central to their work.⁵²

“One of the major challenges we had to overcome was building trust among parents who were skeptical in allowing their children attend the event. We overcame this by collaborating and getting the consent of the community elders who in turn endorsed the authenticity of our initiative. “

- Reflections from a Young Leader (Nigeria)

⁴⁹ Olagunju et al., Peace First Fellows-in-Residence, Focus Group Discussion with Olaoluwa Abagun, Online.

⁵⁰ Christens and Kirshner, “Taking Stock of Youth Organizing.”

⁵¹ Christens and Kirshner.

⁵² Skinner and French, “Youth-Led Community Organizing: Values-Driven Work,” 10.

Social change efforts by youth are also inherently collaborative and focused on collective change, intentionally moving beyond the traditional concept of partnerships to forge relationships with allies.⁵³ For example, a youth-led agro-business/economic empowerment project in Zanzibar engaged community members to keep the chickens being reared safe from theft and wild animals.⁵⁴ Beyond the intended effect of increasing economic opportunities for the beneficiaries, the project also brought the community together and helped bridge the intergenerational gap.⁵⁵

This study also revealed that a significant proportion of young leaders supported by Peace First in the MENA region in particular had to partner with prominent individuals and local authorities for project validation. In some cases, these partnerships were critical in order to weather through bureaucracy where permits and/or licenses were required for project implementation. Sometimes, however, forging such partnerships was impossible, and it meant that the concerned project could not continue. Similarly, there are some strong indications that young people in Sub-Saharan Africa want to partner with government stakeholders but have not been able to due to bureaucracies within public institutions and some peculiar power dynamics. While such partnerships have been successful in some instances, it is not without significant tensions and difficulties.

“I had a challenge actually, which made me stop the initiative. There was a shift regarding the regulations...There were very restrictive regulations regarding volunteering and working in the affected area

⁵³ Skinner and French, “Youth-Led Community Organizing: Values-Driven Work.”

⁵⁴ Mauto et al., “Lessons and Experiences from the Urban Youth Fund.”

⁵⁵ Mauto et al.

and a small initiative like mine needed to be approved by the municipality of the region.”
- Reflections from a Young Leader (Lebanon)

“[We received] threats from politicians, who actually thought that we are fighting them. We explained our advocacy issues and made it clear that we are fighting for the rights and [safety] of our community.”
- Reflections from a Young Leader (Uganda)

3.3.2 Working at the Intersection of Social Issues

As inequalities continue to widen across communities, there is evidence that the prevalence of youth-led social action also increases to tackle these injustices.⁵⁶ Youth-led initiatives have prioritized a wide range of social issues, including education, human rights, gender equality, racial justice, health, environmental sustainability, and improving livelihoods.⁵⁷ Notably, youth-led interventions continue to demonstrate exceptional understanding of the interconnectedness of these issues within their communities by typically addressing more than one issue at the same time.⁵⁸ This signifies young people’s “willingness to address these issues in all their complexity,” as opposed to “over-simplifying or isolating issues from their cultural, historical, or socio-economic contexts.”⁵⁹ Overall, the study established that it is common for youth-led social change projects to address multiple issues, even in cases where they do not necessarily set out to do so.

“[In Kenya] young people found out that bike riders sometimes offer young girls money for sanitary pads in exchange for sex. And so they

⁵⁶ Christens and Kirshner, “Taking Stock of Youth Organizing.”

⁵⁷ Christens and Kirshner; MacNeil, “State of the Field in Youth-Led Development through the Lens of the UN Habitat’s Urban Youth Fund”; Ho, “Mapping Youth-Led Engagement”; Ho, Clarke, and Dougherty, “Youth-Led Social Change”; Plan International, “A Better Normal.”

⁵⁸ Christens and Kirshner, “Taking Stock of Youth Organizing”; MacNeil, “The Challenge and Promise of Youth-Led Development”; MacNeil, “State of the Field in Youth-Led Development through the Lens of the UN Habitat’s Urban Youth Fund”; Ho, “Mapping Youth-Led Engagement”; FRIDA, The Young Feminist Fund and AWID, “Brave Creative Resilient.”

⁵⁹ MacNeil, “State of the Field in Youth-Led Development through the Lens of the UN Habitat’s Urban Youth Fund,” 28.

know that problem could speak to poverty...where young girls cannot afford to buy sanitary pads. At the same time, when young people then try to provide a solution to that problem seeing that bike riders are trying to take advantage of that situation, they then look for ways to empower these young girls with skills so that they can begin to make some sort of income, and they can also begin to afford to buy sanitary pads. Doing that overlaps between [two SDGs] no poverty...and decent jobs and economic growth, because the solution that has been proffered in order to eradicate period, poverty is empowering the girls with [economic] skills.”

- Seun O. (Peace First Fellow-In-Residence, Sub-Saharan Africa)⁶⁰

4. RECOMMENDATIONS & IMPACT

This study zoomed in on the collective community impact made by youth-led initiatives across their communities, especially with respect to advancing social connectedness. The key findings have informed three recommendations for Peace First and other youth-serving organizations to better support young changemakers as they seek to maximize community impact through their social change projects. These recommendations are:

1. Investing in capacity building on monitoring & evaluation and impact measurement.
2. Providing tailored support for young leaders who are navigating relationships with difficult stakeholders on the ground.
3. Encouraging young changemakers to share the challenges they face in designing and implementing social change projects.

⁶⁰ Olagunju et al., Peace First Fellows-in-Residence, Focus Group Discussion with Olaoluwa Abagun, Online.

These three recommendations are discussed below, along with further insights to inform future action at the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness, Peace First, and beyond.

4.1 Capacity Building on Impact Measurement

“It’s very hard to quantify what we’re doing or how much impact we’re having. [There are] certain skills that you don’t realize you’re going to need and that you might not have yet and that you need to learn. And I think [measuring impact] is one of the kinds of things that you do have to learn...that is one of the areas where young people probably can benefit from support from organizations like Peace First.”⁶¹

This study revealed that there are huge capacity gaps among young leaders, especially around impact measurement, monitoring, and evaluation.

In their project reflections, young changemakers supported by Peace First were often quick to express their community impact in terms of numbers of individuals reached, engaged or supported by their projects. For projects where such quantitative data were unascertainable and/or difficult to collect, young leaders struggled with describing their impact in clear and tangible ways. While a few of them attributed this to the typically short life cycle of youth-led social change initiatives, others attested to lacking core monitoring and evaluation (M&E) skills and the requisite expertise to measure the impact of their social change projects. Considering that young people typically launch social change projects without access to formal training on project management or community development, these gaps are expected.

Given this reality, it is necessary for Peace First and other organizations that offer support to young changemakers to prioritize the development of M&E

⁶¹ Borchardt-Hume, Founder, Thread Ahead Interviewed by Olaoluwa Abagun, Online.

and impact measurement skills. Supporting the development of these skills can take the form of traditional modules, peer mentorship, and access to impact measurement toolkits designed specifically for short-term social change projects.

4.2 Navigating Relationships with Difficult Stakeholders

As previously discussed, young people across the MENA and Sub Saharan Africa regions have shared significant challenges around partnering with and/or engaging government stakeholders. Bureaucracies within government institutions and the power imbalances between government representatives and youth actors are the major contributing factors cited by young changemakers. These dynamics have far-reaching implications for how much youth-led initiatives in these regions can impact their communities, especially in contexts that require government approvals and permits before social change projects can be rolled out. This presents an opportunity for Peace First and other youth-serving organizations to provide tailored support for young people within these regions on sustaining relationships with difficult (but relevant) stakeholders, preventing/responding to opposition tactics, and weathering through bureaucracies within formal institutions.

4.3 Normalizing Problem Sharing by Young Changemakers

“When we do VCPs [Verification and Coaching Process] in MENA region, you would most probably have the answer of everything will go fine, because they have this feeling that they need to show us that they are superheroes, and everything's under control, because they think that this might affect their chance, where we don't have so many grants-giving organizations in the MENA region.”

- Yousra M. (Peace First Fellow-In-Residence, MENA)⁶²

⁶² Olagunju et al., Peace First Fellows-in-Residence, Focus Group Discussion with Olaoluwa Abagun, Online.

Interesting learning emerged from this study regarding the likelihood of young changemakers to share their challenges and ask for support. In particular, young leaders across MENA, Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa were said to typically project themselves as “superheroes” needing little or no support as they design and implement their social change projects. This is particularly rooted in the fear of being seen as less qualified to receive financial support in a very competitive resource landscape for youth-led initiatives. While young leaders in these regions are usually knowledgeable about their communities, their reluctance to share these challenges often means that they cannot maximize the support offered by youth-serving organizations like Peace First. To further strengthen the capacity of young changemakers to implement even more impactful projects, it is important to normalize problem sharing. Alongside success stories, challenges and failures also need to be highlighted as teachable moments. This will assure young leaders that they are not alone and encourage them to ask for support when they need it.

4.4 Future Action & Implication for Youth-Led Work

“Perhaps something that we could work on, is to better equip young folks in terms of storytelling, so that they are in a better position to speak to those qualitative insights that they have on their own projects. One thing that I find, at least in my region is that people don't really have a clear idea of how to measure their project's impact, or their idea of measuring impact is like, oh, I will tell you how many people were involved in the project. And so I'm constantly thinking about how to teach them other ways of thinking about impact.”

- Paula C. (Peace First Fellow-In-Residence, Latin America)⁶³

While this study provided deep insights into the unique role that youth-led initiatives play in advancing social connectedness and community well being, it

⁶³ Olagunju et al.

threw up a related question to consider: How might we embrace new ways of understanding and describing the impact of youth-led social change projects? From the reflections shared by young changemakers within the Peace First global community, it is clear that young people are often constrained by traditional tools and metrics for measuring and communicating impact in the nonprofit space. These include the number of people reached, economic opportunities accessed, and insights from baseline and post-project surveys completed. The study highlighted the inadequacy of these traditional metrics and tools to capture the holistic impact that young people make across their communities, especially within the dimensions of Peace First's core values -Courage, Compassion, and Collaboration. As demonstrated by the key findings, young changemakers are challenging harmful norms, centering traditionally marginalized voices, putting 'love' and 'togetherness' into community development work, and addressing multiple inequalities with intersectional solutions. Certainly, these critical dimensions of impact require more than numbers and surveys to be accurately captured.

With such clarity, there is a need to develop more flexible tools and metrics that help young changemakers tell the stories of their diverse forms of impact. On one hand, for the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness (SCSC), this offers an opportunity for further research around measuring intangible elements of community well-being and connectedness. For instance, what model framework can serve as a benchmark to ascertain the extent to which social change projects foster togetherness or bridge divides within and across communities? On the other hand, Peace First and other youth-serving organizations are also presented

with the opportunity to co-create and implement fresh ways of capturing the holistic impact of youth-led initiatives beyond numbers and surveys. In particular, creative and participatory evaluation tools have continued to emerge within the youth leadership space. There are potentially huge benefits from exploring and integrating them into evaluation plans for youth-led community work.

5. CONCLUSION

Overall, this qualitative study enabled a deeper understanding of the unique forms of collective community impact made by young changemakers. From the nimbleness of youth-led initiatives in responding to community needs and their commitment to raising strategic awareness on “taboo” issues, to their exemplary values-driven community work and expertise in using creative tools to bridge community divides – it is clear that youth-led initiatives are intentional about improving their respective communities’ well-being and strengthening social connectedness. To further amplify these important dimensions of community impact, there is a need for Peace First and other youth-serving organizations to improve the capacity of young changemakers to engage in effective impact measurement, provide tailored support for young leaders who struggle with difficult stakeholders on the ground, and to be deliberate about spotlighting the challenges that young changemakers face – alongside their success stories.

More importantly, this study has demonstrated the opportunity for further research and programmatic interventions to focus on the development of more holistic tools and metrics for measuring the impact of youth-led social change initiatives beyond numbers. While this was beyond the remit of this study, SCSC,

Peace First and other youth-serving organizations should support this relevant work in the near future. Conversations around building better societies do not often center the critical role and contribution of youth leadership and action.⁶⁴ It is imperative to design the requisite tools that enable young changemakers to tell the stories of the far-reaching impact they make in fostering belonging and connectedness across their communities. This will further contribute to amplifying young leaders' voices and uplifting their valid experiences as champions of social change.

⁶⁴ Muraco et al., "Youth Perspectives on Youth Power As the Source of Community Development."

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