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YOUTH ACTION IN
FRAGILE SETTINGS

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Cover photo: Hawulatu carrying pieces of wood to build a fence at her school in a community in the upper west region of Ghana

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Glossary

Term	Explanation
DIY	Do it yourself
Early and/or forced marriage	A formal marriage or informal union before age 18.
Ebola	An infectious and frequently fatal disease marked by fever and severe internal bleeding, spread through contact with infected body fluids by a filovirus (*Ebola virus*), whose normal host species is unknown.
Female genital mutilation (FGM)/cutting	Female genital mutilation/cutting refers to all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons.
Intersectionality	An understanding of how gender intersects, for instance, with race, religion, sexuality, economic situation, political affiliation and geography.
Sexual and reproductive health	Good sexual and reproductive health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing in all matters relating to the reproductive system. It comprises the ability for people to have a satisfying and safe sex life, the capability to reproduce, and the freedom to decide if, when, and how often to reproduce.
Sexual and reproductive health rights	These include the right to have access to sexual and reproductive health care and information, as well as autonomy in sexual and reproductive decision making. They are human rights; they are universal, indivisible, and undeniable.
Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)	Gender-based violence is considered to be any harmful act directed against individuals or groups of individuals on the basis of their gender. It may include sexual violence, domestic violence, trafficking, forced/early marriage and harmful practices such as female genital mutilation. Sexual violence may take many different forms, including rape, attempted rape, sexual slavery and/or trafficking, forced pregnancy, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, sexual abuse, and forced abortion.
United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 (UNSCR 2250) on Youth, Peace and Security (2015)	This resolution calls upon member states to increase and support the participation of young women and men in institutions and mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflict, and for countering violent extremism; it calls for the root causes of conflict and violent extremism, and their impact on young people, to be addressed.
United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security (2000)	This resolution reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, and in peace negotiations, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction, and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. UNSCR 1325 urges all actors to increase the participation of women and incorporate gender perspectives in all United Nations peace and security efforts.
Youth/young people	For consistency, this report uses 'youth' as defined by the UN (aged 15-24) across the three countries discussed, although each country has its own definition and age parameters. The report recognises that societies identify social indicators that mark the transition from youth to adulthood, which are not age-specific. The category of 'youth' is context-variable. 'Young people' refers to both young men and women in this age category.
Young people with disabilities	This includes those young people who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments that in interaction with various barriers – such as economic, political, social, and environmental barriers – may hinder their equal, full and effective participation in society.
Youth bulge	Refers to the demographics of an area or region with a significantly larger youth population, typically with those under 35 years making up more than 20% of the whole population.
Vigilantism	A form of law enforcement undertaken without legal authority, outside of formal state institutions. In the African context, vigilantism has a broad range of meanings, from non-violent community policing to groups undertaking criminal activities, and involvement in violent crime.

List of acronyms

AIDS	Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
CBO	Community-based organisation
CSO	Civil society organisation
CVE	Counter violent extremism
DFID	Department for International Development, UK
FCAS	Fragile and conflict-affected states
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
IDP	Internally displaced people
ILO	International Labour Organization
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
KIA	Kachin Independence Army (Myanmar)
KIO	Kachin Independence Organisation (Myanmar)
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NEYA	National Ethnic Youth Alliance (Myanmar)
NLD	The National League for Democracy (Myanmar)
NYC	National Youth Council (Nigeria and Sierra Leone)
NYF	National Youth Forum (Myanmar)
NYP	National Youth Policy (Myanmar)
MWASD	Ministry for Women Affairs and Social Development (Nigeria)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
RUF	Revolutionary United Front (Sierra Leone)
SGBV	Sexual and gender-based violence
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNSCR 1325	United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security
UNSCR 2250	United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security

SUMMARY

A girl from Kailali district, Nepal

This report presents evidence on how young people contribute to the formal and informal processes that address fragility at local and national levels, and the extent to which their actions have impact. It focuses on the non-violent ways through which young people respond to fragility and conflict and shows that their actions deserve to be understood and acted upon. The report highlights how experiences of fragility are gendered, as are the spaces for youth action. Fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS) are often characterised by the presence of non-state actors that carry out governance and service delivery functions; state actors may largely be absent, or themselves be violent. This generates complex relationships between youth and the state, as young people need to navigate both state and non-state actors, as evidenced in the case studies in this report. While youth in FCAS are often portrayed as 'at risk' or 'a risk to others', this study found overwhelming evidence of the multiple ways in which young women and men make life liveable for themselves and others, and mitigate fragility.

This report is based on qualitative research carried out by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and Plan International UK in 2016 in **Myanmar**, **Sierra Leone** and **Nigeria**. These countries have different histories of conflict and experiences of fragility in more than one dimension, following the OECD (2015) definition of fragility. The study involved a unique component of **youth-led research** as youth researchers joined the team in each country. Their reflections on their encounters with other youth and on the research process have enriched the findings and helped us understand fragility and action from a youth perspective.

Young people are often the largest group in countries affected by fragility and conflict, yet there remains a weak understanding of their experiences and needs. This report shows that while violent conflict and instability are key factors affecting their security and wellbeing, young women and men are particularly concerned with the ripple effects of fragility on their mobility, their livelihood and educational opportunities, and their (reproductive) health. Ultimately, young people are concerned that fragility will affect their capacities and opportunities for attaining the milestones that mark the transition to adulthood, like marriage and sustaining their parents and families. Findings emphasise the need to unpack fragility from a youth perspective and to examine how fragility impacts young people's lives in the short and long term.

In **Sierra Leone**, young people have taken initiatives to further community development and organise local 'safe spaces' where young women and men can discuss their challenges and engage in peer support. In **Nigeria**, youth seek to overcome ethnic and religious divisions that could potentially lead to violence by purposefully developing social and economic relationships with youth from different ethnic groups. In **Myanmar**, young people have mobilised collectively and developed informal links to the ethnic militias, thus preventing the escalation of conflict in some instances.

Survival and aspirations to attain the milestones of adulthood are important drivers of youth action. **Through subtle, everyday actions that contribute to peace, security and development, young people are addressing fragility.** The entry points for youth engagement are those aspects of fragility that affect young people's lives – or the lives of their families – on an everyday basis, such as the lack of public security, livelihoods and social trust in their immediate environment. Young people's actions contribute to promoting discourses that challenge discrimination, violence and exclusion; and to building peace constituencies. Some of these actions are born out of the need to survive: tactics to protect themselves or their loved ones. Yet young people also act for moral and political reasons, and use more strategic agency to negotiate with state and non-state authorities to improve services and security, or take part in local structures to provide these themselves, thus enacting the change they want to see. The study identifies several factors that contribute to the impact of young people's informal strategies. Youth activists act as role models and adult leadership figures mentor young people and legitimise youth actions. In many countries, religious leaders promoting peace and dialogue are a great support, and also offer avenues for mobilisation. While patriarchal norms continue to limit the engagement of young women and girls, the study found evidence suggesting generational shifts and attitudinal change are happening in some places, like in Sierra Leone, where some young men are willing to recognise and address gender equality, and young male activists work alongside female advocates.

Gender strongly shapes experiences of fragility *and* forms of everyday youth action. As can be expected, initiatives specifically set up to address issues affecting young women and

Young people take part in a workshop in El Salvador

girls are more mindful of the social norms and barriers that limit the participation of young women, and are more likely to involve them. Yet not all youth initiatives are inclusive: they may even reproduce the social norms and power dynamics that sustain gender inequality, thus failing to incorporate the needs of women and girls, or they may exclude poorer youth. Also, youth actions and initiatives can be quite ambiguous: while there are reports that vigilante groups in Nigeria have in some instances enhanced public security in neighbourhoods (young women have reported that their presence means they feel they can move around more safely and easily), they may collaborate with political actors in ways that perpetuate ethnic tensions.

The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security (December 2015) will hopefully create new momentum to support the participation of young people in *all* relevant processes. Formal youth institutions such as National Youth Councils risk becoming politicised, are usually not inclusive, lack

GAM AWNG: YOUTH ACTIVIST IN MYANMAR

Gam Awng is a 24-year-old church youth leader in a village in Kachin State, Myanmar. He was elected to this position three years ago. He organises sports and leisure activities to nurture relationships between youth from different ethnic groups. He holds youth meetings at the house of a religious leader. He is aware that he might thus be excluding young people who belong to different churches. If he holds these meetings at the house of the village leader, however, everyone could come, but he would have to get permission from the district and officials would ask 'difficult questions'. He finds it easier to organise through the church, and has learned to negotiate with village authorities to organise youth activities.

support and often have no real influence: they cannot be the default option for increasing youth participation. Young people are often sidelined from important policy and development processes if these are not 'earmarked' for youth, even if they have direct impact on their lives. In some instances, youth civil society has successfully mobilised to be included in such processes, such as in Myanmar's peace process, but struggles to have real influence. The findings in this report remind us that the impact of formal processes may be limited even if openings for youth participation exist,

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likely to be suspicious of any effort aimed at the empowerment of young people, strategies are required that create an enabling environment and generate their support for young people's innate will to do well. These challenges thus underline the need for approaches that target both state actors and youth civil society.

The report provides three sets of recommendations, based on a principle of recognition of and support for existing youth actions. Firstly, **policy actors are urged to promote a discourse that emphasises the *positive* role that young people can play in fragile settings;** to advocate for the inclusive and sustained participation of youth in *all* relevant policy processes; and, where possible, to broker access to the state for youth civil society.

Secondly, **for effective youth programming, actors supporting young people need to be aware of everyday youth actions and look for alignment,** while accompanying youth initiatives in improving gender equality and inclusion, and promoting understanding between different groups. Programmes need to explore possibilities for scaling up by facilitating youth interactions with other youth, and to broker interactions with state actors based on power analysis.

Thirdly, **to enhance gender equality more needs to be done to articulate how patriarchy and gender bias operate in policy processes and programmes, and in state institutions, and then address it.** Interventions need to make more use of female mentors, role models, and women-only spaces to help young women gain confidence; and learn from existing initiatives in which young women *and* men collaborate to enhance gender equality.

To conclude, **young people hold great potential to contribute to peace and development.** At the same time, it is crucial to recognise that **young people cannot be made responsible for resolving problems and conflict that have deep structural and political causes.** While formal processes are important, they are often exclusive and lack legitimacy, and even if these challenges are overcome, they are not the sole answer to mitigating conflict and fragility. The everyday actions and initiatives of young people provide key insights into what youth prioritise in contexts of fragility, how peace and development can be realised, and the kinds of actors and processes young people find legitimate, and why.

and that youth engagement is often not sustained after completion of a process.

This study identifies factors conducive to more effective youth participation in formal processes, such as the building of broad alliances of youth organisations, strategic relationships with state actors that might champion youth, and active dialogue between national and local level youth to enhance their representation. Often, youth civil society itself is fragmented in these contexts, based on differences in ideology or identity. The challenge youth diversity poses to representation in any formal process is often overlooked. Despite gender equality being placed at the centre of many youth policies and frameworks, patriarchy runs through state institutions in the countries in this study, including those very institutions that need to promote the empowerment of women and youth. Here, ethnic and religious discrimination on the part of the state constitute a major barrier to accessing political spaces, but in some places this has prompted youth mobilisation. As government actors and non-state authorities are

INTRODUCTION

A girl from Lamahi district, Nepal

International momentum is growing to involve young people in processes that address fragility and violent conflict. Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals aims to reduce all forms of violence, and promote inclusive societies. Goal 16 recognises the importance of the genuine participation of citizens, particularly the most marginalised. The 2015 United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security (UNSCR 2250) calls upon member states to increase and support the participation of young women and men in institutions and mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflict, and for countering violent extremism. This emphasis on young people's potential contribution to peacebuilding is welcome, as previous policy discourses have largely emphasised a large youth population in a country as a risk to stability.[1] The 2011 World Development Report highlighted that high levels of youth unemployment could prompt young men in particular to participate in violence and crime,[2] despite the mixed and sometimes contradictory evidence for a linear relationship between unemployment and violence.[3] Young people were considered prominent actors in civil wars in West Africa[4] and during the Arab uprisings.[5] More recently, the international security agenda has again focused on youth in its efforts to counter violent extremism (CVE).[6]

While there is recognition that conflict and fragility can generate 'shocks' that often have lasting implications for life course transitions,[7] little is known about how different aspects of fragility intersect and impact on the life course. This report challenges views that fragility is merely about instability and violence. While these are important, young people are deeply concerned about their implications for education, livelihoods, their health and wellbeing, and ultimately on their prospects of marrying, raising a family and taking care of their parents. Different dimensions of fragility are mutually reinforcing: violence and other forms of crisis often deepen pre-existing forms of vulnerability. Throughout the research process for this study it was painfully clear that women and minorities are disproportionally affected. Young women and girls are especially at risk of exploitation with immense consequences for their future opportunities.

Based on qualitative case study research in Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Myanmar, this report describes how young men and women experience fragility in everyday life. Rather than portraying young people

YOUTH: THE LARGEST BUT LEAST VISIBLE GROUP

The current world population is the youngest ever: 1.8 billion young people are in the age group 10–24 years old.[9] More than 600 million young people live in fragile and conflict-afflicted areas, and in many fragile countries more than 60% of the population is under age 25.[10] Children and youth are also highly represented among refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), with 50% of the world's 21.3 million refugees now under age 18. This makes youth the largest group that experiences the impact of fragility and conflict, yet they remain invisible as a group with specific needs and capacities. Their voices are often not heard by governments, development actors or relief agencies alike.[11]

as either 'at risk' or 'a risk to others', this report shows the multiple ways in which young people contribute to processes that address and mitigate fragility in non-violent ways. Their actions contribute to promoting discourses that challenge discrimination, violence and exclusion; and to building peace constituencies. Some of these actions are born out of the need to survive: tactics to protect themselves or their loved ones. Yet they also act for moral and political reasons, and use more strategic agency to negotiate with state and non-state authorities to improve services and security, or take part in local structures to provide these themselves. The report therefore aligns with studies emphasising that the majority of young people do not engage in violence,[8] and that their non-violent strategies of dealing with fragility and conflict need to be better understood.

At the same time, youth actions are sometimes excluding and ignore the interests of young women and marginalised youth. Youth action can also become part of dynamics perpetuating fragility, such as young men taking part in the exploitation of young women in Sierra Leone, or vigilantes monitoring cases of homosexuality in Nigeria. Forms of youth action offer valuable insights for how peace and development can be realised, while they may also need accompaniment to become more inclusive and accountable, and include the voices and interests of young women.

Study focus and methodology

This study aims to show how young people contribute to the formal and informal processes that address fragility at the local and national levels, in different fragility settings, and to what extent their actions have impact. It focuses on fragility settings where violent conflict and instability, in the past or present, have been a major driver of fragility, yet also seeks to understand how these dynamics intersect with other forms of fragility that might matter to youth. The study addresses the following questions:

1 Where have young people contributed to impactful formal and informal processes that address fragility at local and national levels?

2 Where were these impactful contributions and processes, and which were the key factors that led to the young people making meaningful and effective contributions?

3 Applying an intersectional lens, which were the key gaps and barriers in young men and women's participation and engagement in processes that address fragility?

4 Did young people's participation in formal and informal processes at local and national levels include the voices of young women? How?

5 How does age impact on the effectiveness of young people's participation? Which entry points throughout the life course can ensure impact?

An initial desk study focused on how fragility is experienced from a youth perspective and what formal and informal processes by and for young people exist to address fragility, which helped to develop the conceptual framework. IDS researchers and Plan International UK then selected three sites for fieldwork: Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Myanmar. Countries were selected for their difference in regime type and state capacity; for experiencing fragility in

more than one dimension; and, for logistical reasons, based on where Plan International has offices. Fieldwork was carried out between October 2016 and January 2017. The research process entailed a component of youth-led research facilitated by IDS. Youth researchers brought unique perspectives to the process. Four youth researchers per country were identified through the network of Plan International offices, and these young people received thorough training in the key concepts, research ethics and methods.

In total, the country teams conducted 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) and 32 key informant interviews (KIIs) in Nigeria, 12 FGDs and 33 KIIs in Sierra Leone, and 13 FGDs and 22 KIIs in Myanmar (Annex). Among those interviewed for the KIIs in each country were ordinary youth, youth activists, representatives of civil society organisations, and government actors. To properly address intersectionalities in the experiences of fragility and agency for action, FGDs were split evenly between younger (14-18/19) and older (19/20-25) youth and between men and women. Other relevant group selection characteristics were determined based on the research site, for example Muslim and Christian groups in Nigeria; displaced and autochthon, dominant and minority ethnic groups in Myanmar. Organising these categories of respondents in separate groups was furthermore essential for conducting this study in a conflict-sensitive matter, while ensuring that a diversity of views on sensitive issues was captured.

Due to the scope of this study it did not include a historical analysis and the report offers only a snapshot of the current context. In Myanmar and Nigeria, security concerns made it impossible to travel deep into the countryside and although the team sought to include respondents from rural areas the findings will reflect realities experienced by urban youth. Due to time constraints and availability of respondents, not all relevant donors and civil society organisations could be interviewed and therefore important programmes that enable youth participation may have been missed. Finally, the study did not address dynamics related to violent extremism or CVE interventions, seeing this as a field that requires dedicated research.

How this report is organised

This report starts with an overview in section 2 of the concepts that are central to this study: fragility, a life course perspective, and youth participation in everyday actions and formal policy processes. After a brief description of the contexts of the three case study countries, section 3 describes how different aspects of fragility are mutually reinforcing, and how they often limit young people's livelihood and educational opportunities, their health and wellbeing, and their transition to adulthood, while fragility sometimes creates new opportunities. Section 4 presents evidence of how young women and men seek to mitigate the causes and effects of fragility in their everyday lives, both individually and collectively, and discusses the gender and power dynamics that influence the extent of the impact of their actions. Section 5 shows how formal, state-led processes and institutions often lack meaningful participation, and discusses the gender and power dynamics that interfere with such formal processes. Section 6 concludes and offers recommendations.

A girl learns with her radio in Sierra Leone

Plan International / Sulaiman Stephens

FRAGILITY AND
YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Girl plays the drums in Zimbabwe

Since two billion people now live in countries where development outcomes are affected by fragility, conflict and violence, interventions in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS) will remain high on the international policy agenda.[12] Debates on the meaning of fragility have shifted away from predominantly state-centric perspectives. The OECD[13] has suggested describing countries as 'at risk of fragility' rather than classifying certain countries as 'fragile', recognising that countries can have local 'pockets of fragility'.[14,15] **The OECD defines fragility as *"the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacity of the state, system and/or community to manage, absorb, or mitigate […] risks"*.[16]** While countries can be more or less fragile in five dimensions (violence, justice, institutions, economic foundations and resilience), violence remains a major driver of fragility: of the 50 most vulnerable countries, 36 score on the violence dimension.[17]

The implications of fragility for a young person's life vary hugely, depending on gender and other intersectional identities, and also on the timing of events in the young person's life course.[18] 'Youth' can be seen as a period when young women and men go through a series of transitions on the path to adulthood, such as going in and out of school, starting to work, entering into relationships and marriage, starting a family, and exercising citizenship. Increased vulnerability due to poverty, or major shocks due to instability or protracted crisis, can affect opportunities and decisions concerning key transitions, sometimes with permanent consequences.[19] Yet crises can also present life opportunities. Young girls may find educational opportunities in displacement camps, for instance, and being in school may postpone the moment they marry.[20] However, a problem with the language of transitions in much of the policy discourse is that it reflects a notion of linearity,[21] which has prompted normative assumptions about how youth might do transitions 'well', 'badly' or 'too early'.[22]

This report recognises that young people are not mere passive victims but actively shape their lives in contexts of fragility. Building on Mac Ginty's[23] concept of 'everyday peace' and Jeffrey and Dyson's[24] notion of 'generative politics', the report will show how young people are involved in informal, community-level processes, acting in 'everyday ways' that are often not considered part of the conventional modes of civic or political participation.[25] Everyday youth action may not even be part of clearly distinguishable processes. For instance, in northern Kenya women from different ethnic groups continued to buy in shops owned by other ethnic groups in the midst of inter-ethnic violence and a socially enforced boycott.[26]

Some youth are charismatic young activists, who work as brokers between the state and community,[27] often distancing themselves from corrupt and inefficient political elites.[28] Equally important are the everyday actions by other young people who contribute to building social cohesion and participate in community development initiatives. As it is increasingly understood that formal and informal governance processes are intricately linked,[29] youth action may target both state and non-state authorities, or be part of security governance organised outside the realm of the state.[30]

Formal, state-led processes can be seen as vital to mitigating and managing 'at risk' contexts, when incorporating various actors and stakeholders into a process aimed at durable solutions.[31] The desk-based review of youth participation in six countries showed that youth are often on the policy agenda as part of state responses to fragility. In Sierra Leone, Nepal and Pakistan, processes of devolution are meant to strengthen youth participation at local and district levels. Most countries have or are developing national youth policies and specific policies and programmes oriented towards young people, with considerable focus on tackling the causes of violence and fragility by engaging youth in education, employment, and political participation. Nepal targeted young people in reform and peacebuilding programmes because of their involvement in the past Maoist conflict.[32] Investing in youth civil society has resulted in a network that mobilised a response to the earthquake in 2015.

Studies show that many policy processes take the form of 'invited spaces':[33] youth organisations and activists are invited to take part in state-led processes, while government actors, and donors too, have much more power relative to young people in shaping the process and the agenda. Existing evidence shows that young people often feel excluded from such spaces based on ethnic, religious or regional difference, or view formal processes as biased towards political elites. **Often, youth participation is nominal and tokenistic.** In every context, for women, these issues are magnified. In El Salvador, women were doubly excluded from political

Girls fetch water in Kenya

spaces due to policy focus on the violence of young men as well as the 'machismo culture' of peacebuilding groups.[34] That said, even in places with deeply patriarchal political systems, like Pakistan, a focus on women's rights from both international NGOs and national governments, and concerted action by women's rights movements, has opened up avenues of participation for women.[35]

This study adopts the OECD's definition of fragility, while it is primarily concerned with how young people experience fragility in everyday life, and how fragility has impacted both young people's opportunities for education, livelihoods, and marriage and family life – irrespective of age – and the decisions they take concerning life transitions. The study investigates forms of 'everyday actions' to refer to the practices and negotiations carried out by young people in response to fragility, and to explore to what extent these actions contribute to peace, security and development.

NIGERIA

PLATEAU STATE

Nigeria ranked among the 'high alert' countries at place 13 on the 2016 Fragile States Index, due to prevailing factionalism among elites, a weak and unaccountable security apparatus, weak public services and performance of the rule of law, failures in the protection of human rights, and grievance among ethnic groups.[36] Conflicts between so called 'indigene' and 'non-indigene' (populations believed to be the original inhabitants of a state and those who migrated there later) have caused violence in many places in Nigeria since the early 1990s. Divisions between indigene and non-indigene often overlap with other identities, such as religion and ethnicity, and these identities have in the past been manipulated and mobilised by political actors, underlining the political roots of these conflicts. The Constitution and legal frameworks grant indigene populations of states preferential access to land, scholarships, development funds, and civil service jobs, directly linking identity to resource politics.

This study was conducted in Plateau State, where indigene ethnic groups are mainly Christian, while the majority of non-indigene are Muslim. Ethnoreligious conflicts have escalated into large-scale violence at various points since the mid-1990s. Since 2009, northern parts of Nigeria have been heavily affected by the Boko Haram insurgency. This – and the government's counter-insurgency – have caused the displacement of over 2.6 million people within Nigeria and regionally, and the loss of an estimated 15,000 lives.[37] The city of Jos, Plateau's state capital, has suffered several bomb blasts claimed by Boko Haram, and hosts half a million people displaced from neighbouring states by its violence. Youth in Plateau State grow up in the midst of ethnoreligious tensions. While the state is not experiencing active conflict, the Boko Haram insurgency has deepened mistrust between Muslims and Christians, which has limited social interactions between groups and consequently reduced livelihood opportunities for young people.

Sierra Leone was ranked at 34 on the 2016 Fragile States Index.[38] Prior to the Ebola outbreak of 2014, Sierra Leone was improving on several aspects of fragility due to a long period of stability following the end of the civil war in 2002. Whilst social and economic trends have remained steady (and high), political and military indicators have generally decreased, with human rights and the rule of law noticeably improving. Specific to the civil war was the notion that entrenched feelings of marginalisation and disenfranchisement among young people drove their participation in armed groups. The 2014 Ebola crisis, which began in Guinea, was the largest outbreak of Ebola in history, causing an estimated 11,310[39] deaths in total and 3,956 in Sierra Leone alone.[40] The crisis deeply undermined trust in the government as people questioned the way it handled the crisis and accused state actors of corruption of aid funds.

The Ebola crisis has resulted in a severe slowdown in trade and livelihood mobility, with the subsequent economic crash forestalling the post-conflict recovery. Recently adopted IMF/World Bank-supported austerity measures have led to marked rises in utility fees and the cost of living. From the regional capital Makeni, research was conducted in the Northern region across Bombali, Koinadugu and Port Loko districts, which were heavilay affected by both the civil war and Ebola. In this post-war and post-crisis context, young people are having to cope with extreme scarcity, lack of livelihood opportunities and major gaps in service delivery, notably education and health care. Forms of exploitation have worsened and are experienced by both male and female youth, while young women are more at risk of sexual exploitation. Although the government has made youth a policy focus, their social-political marginalisation remains a huge challenge, and youth continue to have a difficult relationship with both state and customary authority.

Emerging from a long period of military rule, Myanmar has recently seen immense change in terms of economic investment and the opening up of political space. The National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung Sang Suu Kyi, took power in March 2016 and prioritised national reconciliation. Currently ranked at 24 on the fragility index, in the 'alert' category, ongoing conflict has offset the country's political and economic gains. Since independence in 1948, conflict has continued more or less without cessation between state military (Tatmadaw) and armed ethnic groups in the ethnic states. Myanmar comprises approximately 135 ethnic groups, with ethnic Burman around 60% of the population. It is administered through seven majority ethnic Burman regions and seven ethnic minority states, which have slightly different administrative structures. The National Peace Process, supported by international donors, is currently seeking a negotiated federal agreement between state, military and ethnic armed groups.

Research for this study was undertaken in Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State in northern Myanmar, which is home to 1.6 million people, the majority of whom are ethnic Kachin. The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) has been in conflict with the Tatmadaw since 1961, apart from a seventeen-year ceasefire from 1994 to 2011. Movement through this area is strictly controlled by the state military. People have lost rural livelihoods through the landmining of agricultural land and the displacement of nearly 100,000 people to IDP camps throughout Kachin State and northern Shan State.[41] The predominantly Christian Kachin people deeply mistrust the state, dominated by ethnic Burmans, for its structural discrimination against ethnic people[42] leading to underdevelopment, and for its control over the state's rich natural resources and opium production. Youth in Kachin live with active violence, that between the KIA and Tatmadaw as well as direct aggression from Tatmadaw. Violent conflict as well as ethnic discrimination by state actors has greatly reduced livelihood opportunities.

YOUTH EXPERIENCES OF FRAGILITY

Young woman at workshop in India

Intersecting forms of fragility

Evidence from across the three contexts shows that young people experience multiple forms of fragility, which can be mutually reinforcing.

In **Myanmar**, violent conflict in the ethnic states intersects with perceived and actual state discrimination against non-Burman ethnic groups and this renders youth in Kachin State more vulnerable. They believed that the state discriminates against the Kachin and other ethnic people through policies of neglect, such as not investing in education, and discriminatory practices, such as making it difficult for Kachin business people to gain licences. High profile murder cases and rape cases, allegedly by military personnel, and arbitrary attacks have deepened this sense of injustice and insecurity. Insecurity deeply restricts travel and trade, and outbreaks of violence have led to the displacement of families. For many young people this has meant the disruption of education and the loss of livelihoods and family assets which could have helped them progress.

In Sierra Leone and Nigeria, pre-existing challenges and vulnerabilities were exacerbated or exposed by 'shocks' or new forms of insecurity and crises. In **Sierra Leone**, the 2014 Ebola crisis had a devastating effect on an already weak economy and reversed important development gains made after the end of the civil war. Where forms of sexual exploitation were common practice before the outbreak of Ebola, respondents emphasised that exploitation of young women in particular had increased, especially in schools (sex for grades) and the workplace (sex for jobs), as well as by young men who offer transport in return for sexual favours. This is the result of both the extreme scarcity of livelihoods and pre-existing norms regarding women's roles. As one 20-year-old woman said:

"When you are in school, even though you don't have money to buy food to eat, the teachers will start asking for money to collect their assignments. This is one of the reasons why most of the students are engaged in prostitution." [43]

In Plateau State in **Nigeria**, findings clearly showed that experiences of insecurity have reinforced economic insecurity. Distrust between Christian and Muslim groups has deepened as the result of the Boko Haram insurgency and associated government responses. Young people looking for paid work are reluctant to go to areas that are dominated by a different ethnic group. As one young man explained: *"I feel insecure. Even the shoeshiners are not coming to our area to look for daily bread [to earn money] and they are scared. Even the Christians cannot go and buy bread in Dadin Kowa."* The prices of food and commodities have recently increased due to the recession, which is the likely cause for an increase in petty crime and robbery, as reported by many respondents, adding another element to everyday insecurity. Many young people connected a scarcity of livelihood opportunities to an unfair distribution of resources:

"Peace means when we are free from war, disease or anything that disturbs and threatens our lives."

Women, aged 21, Sierra Leone

"Peace means we can go anywhere safely and talk freely. We would have the right to say wrong if government does wrong."

Man, aged 20, Myitkyina, Myanmar

"Presently in Nigeria, corruption has not killed but has partially conquered the country." [44] They also expressed strong views that the real causes of inter-ethnic tensions were political, saying that a small political elite is largely responsible for 'hijacking' the country's wealth and inciting ethnoreligious violence.

Across the three countries, young women are disproportionally affected by fragility. Their opportunities are often more restricted due to socio-cultural norms, and male bias in terms of jobs, education and participation. When facing insecurity, they may choose not to travel for work and educational opportunities, or protective parents will forbid them. As this chapter will show, insecurity and immobility then have both an immediate impact on livelihood and educational opportunities, and longer-term implications for caring responsibilities, marriage prospects, and general wellbeing. Importantly, fragility does not simply 'happen' to young people, it circumscribes and

"In our societies, men are more free than women and they can do whatever they like. It is true that young men mingle more than women. Our parents and the society in general give them that freedom. You know they say: 'It's a man's world.'"

Woman, 23, Muslim, Nigeria

limits their options, making them rely on exploitative or unequal relationships and actively choose 'safer' or more strategic livelihood and educational options.

Girls filling up jerry cans with water from a borehole dug by Plan in Baratuku resettlement camp

Implications for life course transitions

Implications for education

Many respondents placed education at the top of their development goals, but were faced with several challenges in achieving these goals. Fragility is not just associated with the poor quality of the education system, but also with periodic disruption of education due to shocks, like loss of a parent or sponsor, school closure during crisis, and displacement. In most cases, young people faced tremendous challenges in returning to education, or dropped out altogether.

In **Sierra Leone** during the Ebola crisis, travel restrictions were imposed and many schools closed. The government made school fees free for two years after the Ebola crisis but by the time many students had returned to a semblance of normality, their funding had ceased and drop-out rates dramatically increased. In **Myanmar**, young people are keen to get an education but a rigid system based on rote learning and teaching to pass exams has left many unfulfilled and having to pay for additional tuition. Ethnic Kachin, Shan and youth belonging to other ethnic minorities are also bitter that their own history and language is not taught in mainstream schools, or that they can't transfer easily from schools run by the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO)[45] to state ones; as one student noted: *"We are called 'illegal students from illegal schools.'"* [46] Others are selflessly starting work to try and allow their younger siblings a better chance at completing education, or tutoring siblings and neighbours to pass exams.

For young women, school is a route to becoming more independent but also to gaining prestige and marriageability for their families; two important aspects of growing up which have been limited by the fragile contexts. In **Myanmar**, young women are under pressure from their families to leave school early and seek work, with preference often given for their brothers to continue education. Even if they complete school and do well, girls still need to gain higher grades than boys to study in the top state universities and gain professional qualifications. In **Nigeria**, an 18-year old woman explained that her family's displacement had delayed her ability to finish school and find a job, as well as potentially delaying her marriage prospects: *"If I was a boy, it would be different. Because a man has no time limit, he can decide not to get married before he is 45 … as a woman, in the next seven years, I will be a liability [to my parents] if I am not married."* [47]

In **Sierra Leone** in the wake of Ebola many girls were subjected to early marriage or experienced teenage pregnancy. Young women also feel their male classmates inhibit their progression: *"If you compete with the boys for certain positions in the school, some are so bad that they will assault you and beat you up at times."* [48] However, a number of young men spoke up for women's rights and discussed how the government needed to do more to tackle sexual exploitation. A 17-year-old male activist said: *"We are trying to reduce child marriage in the district but it is not easy… (…) The culture of our people is one of the barriers to female education in the region. What we are now doing is to involve parents from different communities to a meeting and we will use the female youth to discuss the role of women towards the development of the nation or the family (…). I think if we continue with [this] kind of sensitisation, the mentality of our people on girl child education and the issue of earlier marriage will reduce in the district."* [49]

Plan International / Rose+Sjölander

Implications for livelihoods

All the young people who participated in this study pointed at the combination of limited mobility due to insecurity, various gaps in their education, and overall scarcity of work as major constraints to finding a livelihood. For young women, this was compounded by social norms that restrict their options to certain kinds of work and curtail their freedom of movement.

In **Myanmar**, when families lose their assets young men and women have to start work at a younger age, often in low-skilled jobs. As this young unemployed woman reported: *"For the time being I can't accomplish my education because my family can't support me. In summer, father trades hardwood and obits. He earns little. So if tailoring can't earn much money, I will have to work with my father and feed my family."* [50] Displaced families moving from an agriculture-based livelihood also lack skills to change work, forcing older youth to start earning. Many young men even feel it is pointless to complete a poor education when the only lucrative work to be found is in the mines or unskilled labour in China. In travelling to seek work, they take the risk of being conscripted into the ethnic army: *"We as youth especially have to be very careful when we go and work in other places. Many of my friends have gone but are conscripted or made to be porters for the army … so lots of us don't go. But then we ask ourselves if we don't go, what else can we do?"* [51] Young women and girls also seek employment abroad and are exposed to the risk of being trafficked to China, where they are sold as maids, or brides. Referred to as 'agents', traffickers offer to help young women find employment in China. One young women said that the *"agents [traffickers] like Burmese girls because they don't smoke and don't drink and have good character".*

In the **Nigerian** context, deepening mistrust between Christians and Muslims has affected young people's livelihood opportunities. One young Muslim man had to give up his small business. He explained: *"I was deserted actually. … Some [customers] ran away, some went with my money, some accused me of trying to play a kind of cheating game."* Fear of violence and crime meant parents limited younger women's movement even further. Some young Muslim women stated that their religion restricted them to home-based livelihood options such as sewing and ironing, and that they had lost part of their clientele.

Girl who was given tools to respond to crisis, Sierra Leone

Across all three contexts, livelihood options for young women were even more limited than for their male counterparts since the 'risky' occupations are not considered appropriate for young women, although the general scarcity of work was altering some of these perceptions. In **Myanmar**, for young Kachin girls from displaced families, expectations have shifted from either working on the land or completing their education and getting a professional job to earning money earlier, at around 18 years old. Displacement into urban areas has offered some the opportunity to do work they would have never dreamed of before being displaced, such as in beauty salons.

Implications for transitioning into adulthood

In fragile contexts, young people feel they cannot progress as they would like. Insecurity and economic downfall has made many young people feel they cannot perform certain responsibilities and attain the milestones that they associate with adulthood, particularly providing for families, and marriage. In Nigeria, youth felt that disruption of education or dropping out altogether lowers the chances of getting a job, and not having paid work means they cannot support their parents and families. Especially in Nigeria and Sierra

Leone, young women felt a lack of income decreased their marriage prospects. The study also found that insecurity prompts decisions concerning marriage as a way of responding to the context. In Myanmar, the conflict context in Kachin State has had a mixed effect on marriage patterns for young people. The search for income and jobs may delay marriage for young urban men and women: men because they first need to be able to provide for a wife, and women because they need to earn money for their families. Conversely, in rural areas, some youth reported that young people are marrying earlier (aged 16 or 17) and quickly having children as fathers with dependants are less likely to be conscripted into the ethnic army. Families facing economic hardship brought about by the conflict benefit financially from marrying off their daughters younger.

Implications for health and wellbeing

Insecurity and the risk of violence clearly affected young people's sense of wellbeing and their physical and mental health, with many youth expressing their fear about themselves or their loved ones becoming victims of violence. Across contexts, feelings of anger, frustration and anxiety about not fulfilling their familial obligations and expectations, while acting within a landscape of constraint, greatly affected young people's wellbeing. Young Nigerians for instance described themselves as being a 'nuisance' to others and to society at large.

In **Sierra Leone**, health and fragility were perceived as inseparable, especially as more women experienced early marriage and teen pregnancy: *"Teenage pregnancy is one of the*

> "During the Ebola outbreak, I lost my husband and things became much harder for me … I was traumatised as people were looking at me differently … I was rejected as my family abandoned us and we were living through the help we were getting from outsiders."

Young woman, 22, Sierra Leone

> "In theory, I think it is normal that you have three square meals in a day, but I remember I have never had three square meals in a day, or maybe probably when I was very little with my parents. (…) I felt the country also owes the youths, to grant the opportunities [so we] would at least have these three square meals. We are not talking about building mansions in Abuja: we are saying we should have relatively a fair life, just a fair life. That is what we are demanding."

Young man, 22, Jos, Nigeria

challenges we do face in Koinadugu District and if girls continue to drop out of schools like this, we are not going to have people [females] that will represent Koinadugu in the near future." [52] For female Ebola survivors especially, there was not only financial difficulty and emotional hardship from losing family and friends, but ongoing stigmatisation from their communities, mirroring the harsh treatment of people living with HIV/AIDS.

In **Myanmar**, young people living in camps for displaced people described cramped living conditions as having a bad influence on youth. They talked of younger children (aged 10-16) losing their childhood as a result of living at close quarters with those older than them and learning from them to take drugs, inhale toxic substances and drink alcohol. More generally, drug use is widespread amongst young people and users report that they started taking drugs due to the pressure of feeling that there is no point to education, family pressure to earn and peer pressure to conform. More men use drugs than women, but young women have had to start earning or taking on other family responsibilities when their brothers become addicts. Almost all Kachin people who took part in the study believed that the lack of action by the state on drugs is part of a conspiracy to wipe out or weaken a generation of Kachin.

CASE STUDY: MYANMAR

KACHIN STATE

MYANMAR

Since 2011, Myanmar has seen huge change in terms of economic investment and the opening up of political space, creating widespread optimism for the future. However, since gaining independence in 1948, conflict has continued between the state military (Tatmadaw) and armed ethnic groups[53] and Aung Sang Suu Kyi has made national reconciliation the new government's top priority, with a growing recognition that youth engagement is critical for sustained peace and stability. To capture youth involvement in these processes, fieldwork was undertaken in Myitkyina, the capital of Myanmar's northern-most state, Kachin. Kachin is home to 1.6 million people, the majority of whom are ethnic Kachin.[54] Young people and children have been heavily involved in Myanmar's civil conflicts, both voluntarily and forcefully recruited into both rebel and state militias and armies. The conflict in Kachin State has forced nearly 10% of the state's population to move, with around 100,000 people living in IDP camps.

EXPERIENCE OF FRAGILITY

For young people living in states affected by protracted ethnic conflict, years of armed warfare, state marginalisation and resource capture further limit their economic and educational opportunities. Physical insecurity limits young people's options even more. The political reforms since 2010 and the new government initially brought seeds of hope, including in the ethnic states. There is now space to protest, set up new schools and organise and young people are making the most of that. However, ethnic division runs deep in Myanmar and many young people from ethnic nationalities believe that the state discriminates against the Kachin and other ethnic people through policies of neglect, making it difficult for Kachin people to fully participate in either the economy or political processes. In other areas, like Rakhine State, violence against Rohingya Muslims has escalated, allegedly involving the state army, drawing international attention and deepening concerns about the fractured transition process.

YOUTH EXPERIENCES OF FRAGILITY AND ITS IMPACT ON THE LIFE COURSE

Displacement, conflict and restricted mobility have severely hampered young people in Kachin State from fulfilling their goals for education or livelihoods, key routes for attaining adult status. Drug use has become widespread, as young people cope with the added pressure of restricted living. Some have missed up to two years schooling and most struggle to bridge the difference between the schools in the rural areas and those in the camps. The situation of young women has been made worse with the ongoing economic insecurity caused by the conflict. Family pressures to leave education and seek work have increased, with preference given to maintaining young men's education. Even where girls can access education, they need to work harder and gain higher grades than boys to gain access to state universities. For Kachin youth, the curriculum is viewed as discriminatory, not inclusive of their own language or history, with ongoing student-led campaigns targeting educational reforms.

Disruption and displacement have meant families have had to move away from agriculture-based livelihoods, and place more pressure on their children to learn valuable skills or earn money any way they can and as soon as they can. Some young men eschew education to travel to China, taking risky work in the mines; some work to keep their siblings in school. For young women, the interruptions in their education and the economic hardship of their families has caused many to start earning money early, at around 18 years old, with some even viewing this as a liberating opportunity to take work and gain their independence.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN EVERYDAY PEACE

Many young men and women are volunteering in the IDP camps, at church events and by distributing food and drugs within conflict areas. While some are volunteering to help get employment, many explained their volunteering as an act of nationalism. Several young men and women explained that they are providing free tuition to younger students to help them matriculate. They too described this as way of helping build Kachin and making it stronger. Other young people fight against inter-ethnic prejudice and suspicion by spreading positive information, through music and social media, for example. Alongside this, many young people work directly with the armed groups as message-takers to provide accurate information and encourage them not to react to rumour or other perceived threats. Young women in particular articulated their desire to make Kachin stronger through individual action and were working hard to get into professions, such as law, where they can challenge social injustice and sexual harassment.

Youth groups are also working towards a more integrated society with a vibrant and expanding network of civil society and youth-led community organisations. Several groups, both formal and informal, and often supported by CBOs or INGOS, raise funds for a range of purposes. A powerful example is the Myanmar Muslim Students and Youth Network (Kachin) which organises exchanges with other groups on religious holidays to take part in each other's festivals, such as Christmas and Eid. Another example is Pat Je San (meaning 'stop and clean up'), a community response to a perceived lack of government support, which helps rehabilitate drug users and disrupt drug supply networks.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN NATIONAL PROCESSES

Since 2012 two groups of national youth networks have established themselves. The National Youth Congress (NYC) is a network of youth organisations focusing on bringing young people together to articulate their concerns, and is currently helping develop the national youth policy in partnership with the state and UNFPA. The National Ethnic Youth Alliance started in 2014 and is an alliance of youth organisations from the seven ethnic states in Myanmar. It aims to provide a platform for ethnic youth in national discussions. They are focussed on creating unity between ethnic youth and an awareness of youth issues in the national peace process.

The vast majority of young people are in no way involved with these national processes. Even in Kachin State, where young people are particularly politically aware and organised, very few people had any notion of how young people could be involved in national processes. However, through taking part young people are learning to engage publicly and affirm, after the years of military rule, that a public voice is possible, especially en masse, with young people taking part in regular demonstrations, peace rallies and prayer rallies, often criticising government development policy. However, youth leaders described navigating sometimes complex permissions in order to hold demonstrations or other events. For young women, the opportunities to be publicly and politically involved are new and still determined by a cultural bias towards men as public actors. However, young female activists are gaining confidence in their role as peacemakers and in the contribution they make to the family income by being creative and looking for ways to make extra money.

Photo: Girl in Rakhine State, Myanmar

EVERYDAY ACTIONS FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT

Girl with traditional cloth, Laos

From across the three countries, it was overwhelmingly clear that young men and women contribute informally to local peace, security and development. On the surface, some of these actions might not be recognised as acts that deliberately address fragility, for example when a young Muslim woman in Nigeria purposefully attends a Christian wedding. The level of impact of such everyday actions might vary, and in many cases the scale of individual actions in particular is unknown. Some of the young people's actions are more tactical, born out of the need to protect themselves and others, and some are more strategic, such as when young people negotiate with state and non-state actors to improve security. The meaning of 'impact', however, lies in the eye of the beholder: it is not just about *what* changed, but also about *whose interests* are addressed.

While some forms of everyday action are intended to promote peace and development,

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KEY FINDING:

Through both tactical and strategic everyday actions young people promote non-violent forms of governance and build constituencies of peace.

</div>

they may not always be inclusive and this therefore makes them part of the dynamics driving fragility. This section outlines some of the actions and activities young men and women undertake to address fragility. It will discuss the entry points for their participation and the power dynamics that shape their efforts, and take a critical look at what young people described as the impact of youth action, and highlight the factors that contributed to change.

Entry points for everyday action

Young people's everyday actions focus on issues that directly impact on their lives: the aspects of fragility that affect their everyday survival, their wellbeing or that of their families. Often, young people take on those issues that they feel they can safely address, but the study also found evidence of young men and women taking on more risky issues. Age in itself is not the single most important determinant of young people's capacities and opportunities to participate in everyday actions that address fragility. Everyday forms of action occur throughout the life course, while the obvious entry point for school-going youth may be the school; for business women, the market place; and for many, the church or the mosque.

'DIY development'
For young people in **Sierra Leone**, endemic poverty and the lack of reach from government services and social protection services has resulted in an admirable 'do it yourself' (DIY) mentality in community development, where everyday activism has become a way of maximising skills, training, networks and reputations without the corresponding financial reward. Schools and neighbourhoods are important entry points where youth act as welfare advocates and organisers. The study encountered neighbourhood cleaning initiatives run by youth, one of the few examples where some form of collaboration with state authorities exists. In various instances,

initiatives could repurpose themselves to address different kinds of issues; for example, a school social club becoming an anti-violence peace club to respond to inter-school rivalry. Such initiatives remain relatively local, mainly because intergenerational tensions and the norms and practices that bolster forms of customary authority obstruct young people's engagement beyond the local level. Respondents felt that accessing politicians is difficult and that effecting (political) change is hampered by corruption and nepotism. While this in part has spurred 'DIY development', it may also mean that these initiatives cannot go to scale, as this requires more institutional linkages to authorities.

In **Myanmar**, the ongoing conflict in Kachin State has given rise to strong nationalism amongst the Kachin people, which has prompted a range of everyday actions. Religious and clan-based disputes have been put aside as young people aim to make Kachin society stronger: *"We have realised that no one is going to help us, so we must be strong on our own,"* said one young woman.[55] This nationalist spirit has motivated a range of individual and collective actions. People consider volunteering in church-run IDP camps, raising funds for IDPs and distributing food and medication within conflict areas as acts of support for the Kachin people. Young men and women explained volunteering as a way to help get employment

and as an act of nationalism. Young men put themselves forward at public events to provide security for KIO leaders.[56] Young men and women are providing free tuition to younger students to help them enrol in higher education. They are also choosing to study hard for vocational professions such as teaching, law and nursing as a contribution to Kachin.

Nurturing social relationships

In both Nigeria and Myanmar, 'othering' is learned from a young age and cements divisions between different ethnic groups. As one young Kachin man put it, mothers threaten their children with the state army when they misbehave. In Nigeria, a young Christian woman said that: *"Small children learn that Islam is a bad thing."* [57] Another young woman commented that *"Religious leaders and parents did not help matters. They always tell us how bad people from the other religions are."* [58] She believes that this socialisation now maintains the mistrust between groups. In this context, efforts by young people to bridge divides are remarkable. In **Nigeria**, many young men and women purposefully develop social and economic relationships with youth belonging to different religions and ethnic groups. Referring to this as the importance of

FODAY: COMMUNITY ACTIVIST IN SIERRA LEONE

Foday is 17 years old and started volunteering for a local community organisation when his mother could not afford his school fees. Now he combines his youth advocacy work with helping his mother earn some money to support his family. Inspired by a visit from the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs, he started working on youth outreach programmes, before getting involved with Plan Sierra Leone's youth advisory panel, which promotes youth participation. He is an active campaigner on the rights of women and the disabled, counting himself a member of several voluntary organisations. His network tries to bring traditional leaders and community members into dialogue with the young people he represents, often with limited success as "the traditional leaders and some community members will not be happy with us as they think [it] is a taboo for a male youth to discuss publicly issues relating to FGM". He blames the national government for not providing enough support for organisations like his.

Plan International

Hayat*, 14, dreams of becoming a maths teacher and returning home to Syria

> "I see myself as a woman of peace. Islam teaches me to be a peaceful person and I should not hate, fight or kill any human being. If Islam teaches me all these, then [I] am supposed to see other people even outside my religion as people that I should make happy. I am supposed to respect everyone and make everyone feel good."
>
> Muslim woman, 23, Jos, Nigeria

'mingling', they attend each other's weddings and mourn together at funerals, participate in both Christmas and Sallah festivities, and continue to use services and buy goods from different ethnic groups. They also seek support in their inner circle of friends by creating peer groups and 'educating themselves' to abstain from violence, encouraged by those religious leaders that promote inter-faith dialogue and peace. They promote discourses that counter public perceptions of Islam as a violent religion and Hausa-Fulani Muslims as violent people.

Young people may reproduce ethnic divisions. Ideological differences about their relationship to the **Myanmar** state has created divisions between young people and their organisations in Kachin. The majority of the ethnic Kachin youth appear to be taking a more nationalist, 'hardliner' stance and support or sympathise with the KIO in its struggle for a high degree of autonomy and control of natural resources. Others are more pragmatic and seek to achieve a settlement with the state that focuses on human rights and integration and compromises on natural resources use.[59] Pragmatists and youth from non-Kachin ethnic groups tend to focus on transgressing ethnic divides in their efforts to build a stronger society. Common to all youth interviewed is a strong desire for peace and no skirmishes over political divisions have happened, but political divisions will need to be addressed for peace to last in the long run.

In both Myanmar and Nigeria, peace rallies and large cultural and sports events are organised to promote peace. Young men and women in Nigeria agreed such events are important for bringing people together and leaving ethnic differences behind, especially because some are afraid to visit areas dominated by the ethnic 'other'. In Myanmar, state security actors scrutinise rallies on topics it considers more controversial, like school curricula and injustice. Some parents are therefore reluctant to let young women in particular participate. For them, attending collective peace prayers organised by the churches was a more accessible public forum.

Preventing crime and violence

In all three contexts, young people engaged in individual, subtle actions that were meant to prevent violence. There is also evidence of young men and women being involved in political actions and directly negotiating with power holders, be they government actors or non-state authorities.

In **Myanmar**, youth noted that hate speech and rumour are common and sometimes lead to escalations in civil violence. Rumour also leads to military escalation of violence in some cases. Young women in particular stated that they play a role in preventing violence by filtering news and rumours, verifying and disseminating information, often using Facebook. Many youth are also active in simply spreading messages of peace. In rural areas, young men and women are taking important steps to prevent military violence by working across ethnic lines. In 2010, for example, young people from Shan,

> "In other regions of Nigeria and here, [people] think that the [Boko Haram] insurgency is perpetrated by the Hausa-Fulani [Muslims]. I am trying to secure my region, and ensure that people will have the right perceptions. I can contribute to changing the perceptions of those who think that, because I am Hausa-Fulani and they think I am one of those [Boko Haram]."
>
> Muslim man, Jos, Nigeria

Girls walk to school in Sierra Leone

Ta'ang and Kachin ethnic groups came together to try to stop tension between these groups escalating into violent conflict. They worked with the armed groups as message-takers, providing accurate information to military leaders and encouraging them not to react to rumours or other events that threatened them. One young woman explained that young people can build relationships with these actors more easily, because they can 'chat informally' and 'drink' with them. Elders, on the other hand, need to follow 'due process' and this hampers effective negotiation with military actors.

In **Nigeria**, vigilantism is a controversial topic due to the involvement of vigilantes in violence and extrajudicial action.[60] Yet the vast majority of respondents identified vigilante groups as major actors in maintaining security in their areas, despite stories about vigilantes being involved in crime, and a lack of downward accountability. Also, Plateau State officials recognise the centrality of vigilantes in providing security, and that the police can only maintain legitimacy by collaborating with vigilante groups.[61] While a bill that should formalise vigilante groups is to be discussed in parliament, the local governments and police already collaborate closely with vigilante leaders. According to respondents, vigilantism offers an entry point for young people to contribute to peace in their communities. Both vigilante members and female respondents emphasise that vigilantism has in some instances enhanced public security in neighbourhoods – young women have reported that their presence means they feel they can move around more safely and easily.

KEY FINDING: 'AMBIGUOUS AGENCY'

One needs to be careful not to romanticise all forms of youth action. Forms of youth action can be viewed as legitimate by young people, but can still be non-democratic, promote conservative values, and be exclusive.

While their role in fighting crime is emphasised, this study's findings suggest that the vigilante groups play a prominent role in managing inter-ethnic relations, at least in the urban and peri-urban sites included in this study. Vigilante groups purposefully recruit people from different ethnic groups. In coordination with police stations, vigilante groups patrol around churches and mosques on days of service, and during religious processions and events, showing the public that Christians and Muslims work together to protect people from both religions. Vigilante leaders talk about inter-religious peace in community meetings. Several vigilante members explained they play a role in early response as they are specifically called in to 'settle disputes', which could easily develop into inter-religious tensions. However, in the past mixed vigilante groups have split along ethnic lines, as in the wake of violent clashes in Jos in 2001, and at times groups have aligned with political actors in their own rather than the community's interests.
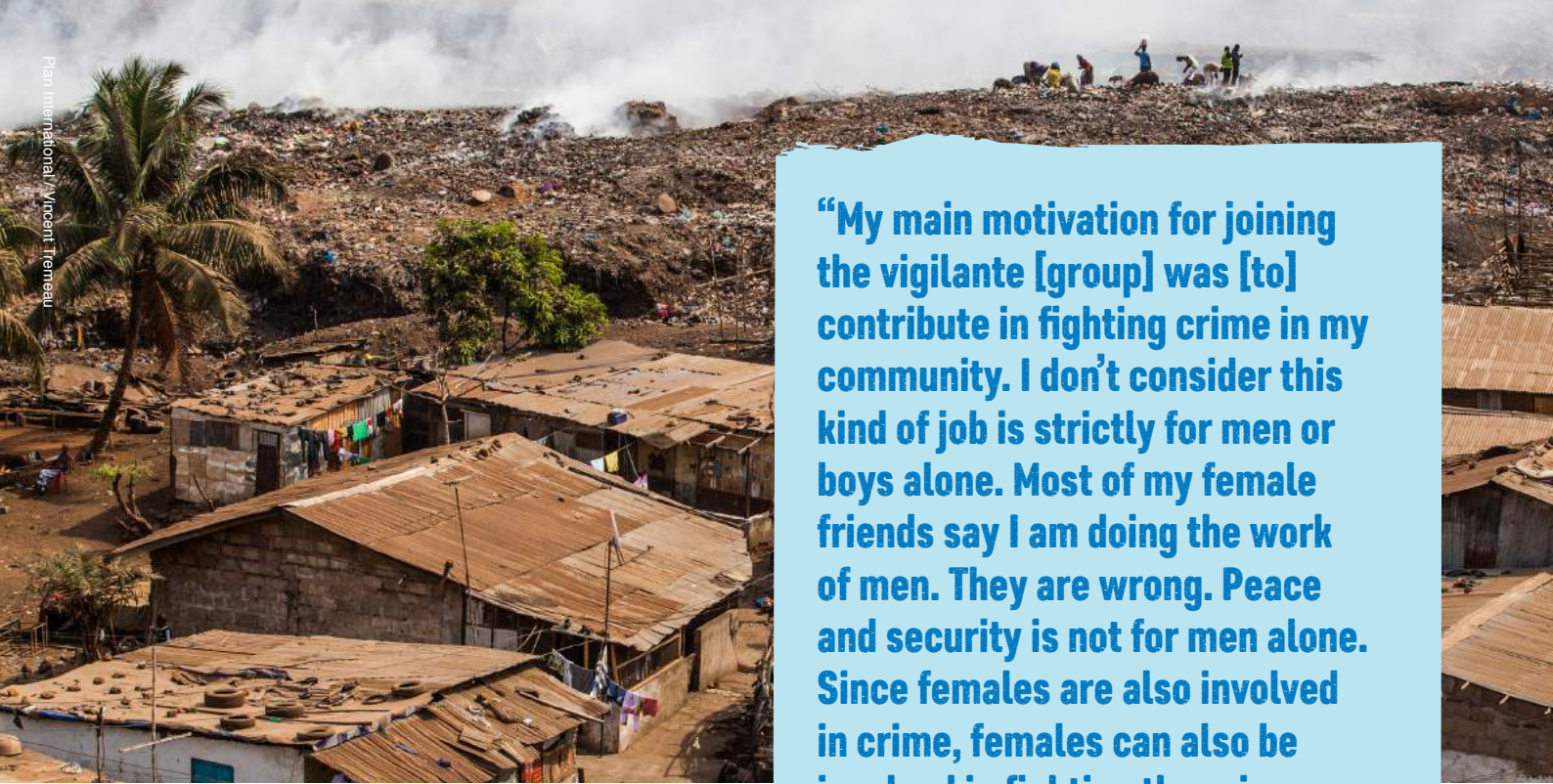
Gender, identity and power

In each of the cases and instances of youth engagement, power dynamics interfere with how engagement evolves, which youth and which issues are included or excluded, and whose needs are responded to. As the report now discusses, **gender needs to be considered in *conjunction with* other patterns of social difference like socio-economic status, and religious and ethnic identity relevant to the local context.** A power analysis of the local context should not only take stock of political actors and politics, but also of social norms that influence youth participation.

In each country, the extent to which more informal youth initiatives worked in a gender-sensitive manner greatly varied. In many instances, norms that limit young women's participation are reinforced within many youth initiatives included in this study, within families, and in public institutions. Social norms govern what is 'appropriate behaviour' for young women. These might change over the life course: a young married woman may potentially experience more restrictions than someone who is younger but still unmarried. Practically, young women are often preoccupied with domestic and caring responsibilities and cannot make time to join activities, irrespective of their age. Insecurity and crime, real and perceived, make young women very reluctant to go to specific places or go out at all, especially after dark, and often parents or carers forbid them.

Despite the positive achievements of local youth groups in **Sierra Leone**, it remained difficult for the young women interviewed to attain leadership positions and even to participate in spaces designed for youth participation. Only women's organisations were specifically focusing on the exploitation of girls and violence against women. Young women explained that their parents and also boys and young men disapprove of them participating in community development, both publicly and at home, creating a barrier to prevent them engaging even in youth-initiated spaces. Married women spoke of the expectation to concur with their husbands in any public meeting rather than speak their own opinion. In some chiefdoms there are restrictions on female participation in meetings. And while some women serve on ward councils, they are still a minority.

In **Nigeria**, norms adhered to by certain Muslim groups restrict young women's mobility, limiting their exposure and opportunities for engaging in everyday actions outside the home, and their opportunities for acquiring leadership and citizenship skills. In **Myanmar**, respondents said it is considered inappropriate for young women to speak in public. Parents in Kachin are very protective of their daughters and can forbid forms of political engagement, such as demonstrations. Yet, public participation seemed relatively less restricted compared to the African contexts. Young women said that men are under extreme pressure to earn,

Slum in Freetown, Sierra Leone

"My main motivation for joining the vigilante [group] was [to] contribute in fighting crime in my community. I don't consider this kind of job is strictly for men or boys alone. Most of my female friends say I am doing the work of men. They are wrong. Peace and security is not for men alone. Since females are also involved in crime, females can also be involved in fighting the crime. Today, some of my female friends are having second thoughts because they see us operate and see how the male vigilantes protect me in their midst"

Female Muslim vigilante group member, 22, Jos, Nigeria

work long days or have migrated to find work. In rural areas, the Kachin Independence Army has recruited many young men. Young women have made use of these openings to step in and engage more politically, motivated by the momentum of the transition.

The findings also suggest that gender norms are being renegotiated and generational shifts are taking place in thinking about gender roles. In Sierra Leone, young men identified teen pregnancies as a key concern and some were passionate advocates against the exploitation of young women and girls, supporting their peers through clubs, local associations and NGO activities. This young man, 15, reported how the experience of a girl from his school had led to his awareness of the urgent need to address teenage pregnancy: *"I recently witnessed a matter concerning a 13-year-old girl … she was pregnant and when I asked her, she said her mother and father asked her to get married to the man that impregnated her. Her condition is so pitiable that you can't stand to see the way she is suffering."* [62] Many young men associated these issues with endemic poverty, discussing how young women were being exploited by 'big men', powerful community figures who could offer material rewards such as expensive mobile phones, sponsorship for education or lodgings away from their families. However, some young men recognised that it was boys their own age who were, in some cases, using income from their employment to influence

young women. As this young man, 21, from Port Loko identified, many of the young men talking about teen pregnancy were "missing the point" as: *"…if we ask the question now, who is impregnating the ladies, it is the boys. So they would need to focus on the boys as well if they want the problem to really be solved."* [63]

At the same time, other young men, feeling left behind, expressed frustration that development agencies focus only on young women. In **Nigeria**, a female Muslim vigilante explained how her brother helped her negotiate with her parents to join his vigilante group. They allowed her to participate on the condition that she would always work in his company. In recent years more young women have joined vigilante groups, as group leaders felt that certain cases are better handled by women. However, one vigilante member suggested that her group monitors cases of homosexuality, a criminal offence in Nigeria, indicating that vigilante groups are not necessarily spaces of more progressive youth engagement.

Impact and how change happens

How significant are the subtle, individual actions for these contexts? When young women and men in Myanmar 'filter' news and try to stop propaganda, and when Nigerian young men and women are trying hard to 'mingle' with youth from different ethnic groups, it is not clear whether these acts have prevented or mitigated actual instances of violence. It may be easier to assess the impact of collective mobilisation, like vigilantism, and how it plays a role in inter-ethnic relationships in Nigeria, and the effectiveness of youth negotiating with military actors in Myanmar. At the individual level, young people speak of having gained respect and about how they have acquired civic action and leadership capacities. At the community level, young people point at development gains, spaces for peaceful dialogue, inter-group collaboration, and enhanced security. In the case of Myanmar, the collaboration of ethnic youth groups locally has culminated in an ethnic youth network that now takes part at the national level (see next section).

The study's findings show that, through everyday actions, young people contribute to building **constituencies of peace:** they maintain inter-ethnic relationships and promote discourses of peace that go against discourses that cement social divisions and instil fear. Their actions demonstrate that peaceful coexistence *is* possible and that, as youth, one should counter divisive politics. Public rallies and demonstrations, which are frequently organised in Myanmar and Nigeria, and sometimes initiated by youth, may not bring change but do serve to strengthen a sense of solidarity, and legitimise smaller acts of peace.

The extent of **inclusion** is a major factor for successful youth initiatives. In Jos city in **Nigeria**, all vigilante groups ensure that the make-up of the groups reflects the ethnic configuration of neighbourhoods as they see that this helps to respond to tensions. In Kachin State in **Myanmar**, few organisations cut across ethnic boundaries, and Muslim youth operate largely on their own, which is considered a risk to long-term peace. The network of different ethnic youth organisations in Shan State claims diversity is the key to their success. Also important is the extent to which initiatives are considered **legitimate** by and **embedded** in local communities, and have active links to state institutions. While vigilante groups in Nigeria are rather obscure actors, it is important to note how they have gained legitimacy: they respond to key security needs; they are members from local communities

and – at least in Jos – are ethnically mixed; and they work with other community leaders. The Plateau State government recognises their legitimacy, and police and vigilante leaders coordinate at all levels of government. In contrast, in **Sierra Leone**, youth initiatives as part of 'DIY development' are partly a response to the corruption and patronage in state institutions as experienced by youth. Lack of trust in state and customary authorities has limited real engagement by youth, and this is also likely to hamper change at a larger scale.

Across the three countries, **mentoring** and **peer education** among young people and between adults and youth came up strongly as factors conducive to effective youth engagement. Many youth also get engaged through social connections and role models. Members of more established community-based organisations (CBOs), once youth activists themselves, are now encouraging young people to become involved in both 'DIY development' in Sierra Leone and in forms of political activism in **Myanmar**. Many Myanmar activists have long worked from the diaspora and have brought back knowledge, experience and networks. Activist youth themselves function as important role models at schools and in communities. For **Nigeria**, youth emphasised the importance of the presence and support of both Christian and Muslim religious leaders at any social event if it is to have any peacebuilding impact. In Kachin State in Myanmar, the churches are also important avenues for youth engagement. Some churches link up with the Kachin Independence Organisation and many are involved in service delivery, including in IDP camps. Young vigilantes in **Nigeria** spoke of the respect acquired by both adult and youth vigilantes that had attracted them to join, and that learning skills from them was a motivator for joining a vigilante group.

The implications for external actors seeking to promote peace, security and development are that these everyday actions are a strong indication of young people's priorities in these contexts, and therefore of where they may like support. The report also underlines the importance of initiatives being embedded in local communities and of the meaningful inclusion and participation of more marginalised groups. Interventions need to offer and broaden opportunities for social interactions and trust building across divisions, and build links to the wider community and state actors to allow initiatives to have influence at higher levels.

CASE STUDY: NIGERIA

Nigeria ranked among the 'high alert' countries at place 13 in the 2016 Fragile States Index.[64] The factionalisation of elites, weaknesses in the security apparatus, weak public services and performance of the rule of law, and failures in the protection of human rights, as well as high levels of grievance among ethnic groups, are among the poorest scores on the indicators of state fragility. Conflicts between indigene and settlers have caused violence in many places in Nigeria since the early 1990s, and are a major cause of fragility nationwide. Divisions between indigene and non-indigene often overlap with other identities such as religion and ethnicity. Conflicts are associated with the Constitution and legal frameworks granting indigene populations of states preferential access to land, scholarships, development funds, and civil service jobs, underlining the political causes of these conflicts. As came out strongly in the interviews and group discussions conducted in Plateau State, the roots of conflict are believed to be the political manipulation and mobilisation of identities by political actors. Since 2009, northern parts of Nigeria have been heavily affected by the Boko Haram insurgency. The combination of Boko Haram activities and the government's counter-insurgency have caused major internal displacement and the loss of an estimated 15,000 lives.[65] For the current study, fieldwork was conducted in the city of Jos in Plateau State, a state located in Nigeria's Middle Belt, where indigene ethnic groups are mainly Christian, while the majority of non-indigene are Muslim. Ethnoreligious conflicts have escalated into large-scale violence at various points since the mid-1990s. The city of Jos has suffered several bomb blasts claimed by Boko Haram, and the state hosts half a million people displaced from neighbouring states by its violence.

YOUTH EXPERIENCES OF FRAGILITY AND ITS IMPACT ON THE LIFE COURSE

The narratives of young people show how tensions between ethnoreligious groups, the societal implications of Boko Haram, and the weak economy are all intimately connected challenges in their everyday experience of fragility, and that some forms of fragility have reinforced or deepened pre-existing forms of fragility. For younger youth, potential violence between different ethnic groups is something they have grown up with, while older youth remembered the days before the first major eruptions of violence. The narratives of older youth thus frequently reflected their experiences from before and after 'the crisis', referring to the violence in Jos in 2001 as an important milestone in their lives when things changed.

More indirectly, the context of insecurity and economic downfall has made many young people feel they cannot perform certain responsibilities and attain milestones that they associate with social adulthood, particularly providing for families and marriage. Disruption of education or dropping out altogether would lower their chances of getting a job, and not having paid work meant that young men and woman could not support their parents and families. Younger women in particular were afraid to travel or had their movement dictated by their families; in some cases, such as for some Muslim Hausa Fulani women, this deepened patriarchal control.

EXPERIENCE OF FRAGILITY

For the young people in Plateau State, ongoing ethnoreligious conflict had helped create a lack of educational opportunities, jobs and livelihoods, underpinned by the inequalities in citizenship status for indigene and non-indigene. Muslim youth in particular expressed a sense of political marginalisation in terms of weak political representation of Muslims in political leadership and state institutions. In recent years, the Boko Haram insurgency has further complicated the situation for young people by both deepening mistrust between Christian and Muslim communities and cutting off valuable trade networks, as well as limiting the ability to travel for further education and training. These issues have only been exacerbated by the official recognition in 2016 that the country is in recession,[66] which, with already high levels of youth unemployment, is only likely to worsen the economic outlook for young people and harden inter-community competition.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN EVERYDAY PEACE

While NGO programmes have supported many large-scale events, the everyday actions of young people to build bridges across ethnic and religious divides have largely gone unnoticed. Known locally as 'trying to mingle', young people do this in different ways. Particular actions include going to each other's weddings and mourning together in funerals; participating in Christmas and Sallah festivities; continuing to use services and buy goods from people who belong to different ethnic groups; and organising inclusive sporting events and peace rallies. Those who have access to phones have used them to communicate with ethnic/religious others in areas where they don't feel safe visiting. Some young people have grown into youth activist roles and actively mediate between residents in their neighbourhoods when frictions arise. They may also function as political brokers between people and vigilante groups, and for local authorities.

Also acting as brokers are the vigilante groups, who whilst having a reputation for violence were identified as an entry point for young people to get involved in work helping their own communities. Vigilante groups purposefully recruit people from different ethnic groups in order to deal with ethnic issues. In coordination with police stations, vigilante groups are present around churches and mosques on days of services, and patrol around religious processions and events, showing the public that Christians and Muslims work together to protect everyone, across religious divisions. Several vigilante members explained they play a role in early response as they are specifically called in to 'settle disputes', which could easily develop into inter-religious tensions. Yet this peacebuilding role of vigilante groups has not been recognised by state authorities.

Photo: Youth gather outside a relief point in Kenya

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN NATIONAL PROCESSES

Although Nigeria has a National Youth Policy it did not resonate with many of the study's respondents, signalling that a design process can generate momentum for engagement, but that this can be lost unless sustained dialogue is integrated in the implementation. The Plateau State Youth Council did momentarily help devolve power and bring young people into participatory spaces at the local and district level before becoming defunct due to infighting and 'hijacking', as the Commissioner for Youth and Sports explained: *"Apart from politics, those who aspired to lead the youth council were drawing their support from ethnic and sectional interests rather than the wider Plateau interest."* [67] As he and other officials reported, Plateau State now lacks one 'rallying point' for the otherwise active youth civil society organisations, religious youth groups and student bodies.

In terms of gender equity, government actors emphasised that gender sensitivity and equality are extremely important, and that both young men and women can contribute to peace in the state. However, apart from the official working for the Ministry for Women Affairs and Social Development (MWASD) in Plateau State, none of the interviewees articulated a clear implementation pathway for gender equality. However, the Bureau for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation was set up in 2016 to implement a range of peacebuilding and early response activities, specifically targeting women, youth and community leaders for training on peacebuilding and conflict resolution, with clear strides still to be made on including young people's own peacebuilding strategies in the process. Despite this limited progress, as part of Plateau State was among the first states to launch its state-level action plan in September 2015, based on Nigeria's National Action Plan in connection to UNSCR 1325. This was the result of an extensive consultative process with civil society actors and, in particular, women's organisations.[68]

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN NATIONAL PROCESSES

A member of a youth action group, Ethiopia

This section outlines policies and programmes implemented at a national level in each case study, focusing on entry points for youth engagement, challenges and power dynamics, and potential for impact. The findings show a real discrepancy between the possibilities for youth involvement in informal, local processes and the extent to which youth get real opportunities to take part in formal, national level processes. **Youth policies and programmes do not offer enough opportunities for the critical engagement of young people.** Despite some small successes, formal processes are not reaching enough young people; are not inclusive; the engagement of youth is not sustained; and their impact is limited. Gender bias and other factors commonly associated with limitations to formal participation are apparent in each context. Importantly, youth-focused institutions like National Youth Councils risk meaning that youth participation is contained in flawed, exclusive and under-resourced structures, and many youth have limited trust in them. This calls for more substantial inclusion of young people in policy processes relevant to them.

Entry points for participation

> **"When we did the first youth forum in 2012 it was very hard. The government was very afraid of youth power. It was under the old government. They were very suspicious. Only five years before then, it had been illegal for more than five youth to gather together."**
>
> Youth activist, Myanmar

New policy processes offer a rallying point for youth organisations to engage in national processes and work together. In all three countries, these were either policies focussing on youth, or processes that did *not* specifically focus on youth but in which youth organisations mobilised to be included. The momentum for engagement strongly differs between contexts. For instance, as part of Nigeria's National Action Plan in connection to UNSCR 1325, Plateau State's 2015 state-level action plan was the result of a consultative process with women's organisations in particular (NSRP 2014). In **Myanmar** the transition offers various openings for policy engagement that youth are excited about, while in Sierra Leone disillusionment, even anger, with the government prevails for its lack of genuine engagement with young people.

In **Sierra Leone** and **Nigeria**, National Youth Councils (NYC) that are part of the government should help to incorporate youth voices into decision-making processes at national and subnational levels. Youth themselves, however, emphasise the bias of NYCs against certain ethnicities or regions, and how politics and co-option have stalled their functioning. When co-opted, NYC members tend to reproduce state agendas rather than work in the best interests of young people in the country. In Sierra Leone, the NYC was bypassed by government departments supporting their own youth groups and councils. Many respondents felt its youth councillors represent the interests of specific political actors. However, some young civil society activists cited the NYC as one avenue for understanding how government works, and as a career step to get into INGOs, advocacy and policy work.

In **Nigeria's** Plateau State, after good momentum in the early 2000s, the council became defunct due to infighting and 'hijacking', as the Commissioner for Youth and Sports explained: *"Apart from politics, those who aspired to lead the youth council were drawing their support from ethnic and sectional interests rather than the wider Plateau interest."* [69] As he and other officials reported, Plateau State now lacks one 'rallying point' for the otherwise active youth civil society organisations, religious youth groups and student bodies. Although Nigeria has a National Youth Policy it did not resonate with many of the study's respondents, signalling that a design process can generate momentum for engagement, but that this can be lost unless sustained dialogue is integrated in the implementation.

Myanmar is an example of a country where government actors and donors have turned to formal youth institutions to start involving youth

in a transition, while they (initially) excluded young people from the National Peace Process. The first National Youth Policy (NYP) formulation process, an initiative of UNFPA and the Ministry of Social Welfare, is under way. The new government made the National Peace Process a priority in 2016. National youth organisations have lobbied the state and the UN for a voice in both processes, with some financial backing from international organisations. Since 2012 two national youth networks have been established. The National Youth Congress evolved from the 2012 National Youth Forum in Yangon and has focused on taking part in the NYP formulation process. The National Ethnic Youth Alliance (NEYA) has brought youth from the ethnic states together to discuss the interests of ethnic minorities and has lobbied for a youth voice in the National Peace Process. However, most ordinary youth had not heard of the NYP or were not aware of what formal space there is for youth in the peace process.

The situation in **Myanmar** shows there is a real risk of people supporting the Kachin Independence Organisation if peace processes are not both inclusive and meaningful to young people. Many young Kachin believe that

"The youth who support violence are many more... During the ceasefire the youth really weren't interested in the peace process, or fighting or joining [the] Kachin Independence Army (KIA). That's all changed now. The conflict has really motivated people. It's not as clear as violence or non-violence. But as the Burmese offensive continues, the support for KIA is growing and growing. People can't see another way of them [Burmese] leaving."

Kachin male youth leader, 28, Myitkyina, Myanmar

Plan International / Max Greenstein

Girls learn about adolescent friendly spaces, Nepal

diplomatic efforts have largely failed to solve the situation in Kachin State as active conflict is ongoing; they therefore lack interest and trust in the state-led peace process. While this comment by an ethnic Shan leader "*We need to work here [in Kachin State] first*"[70] refers to constructive local engagement, others fear that the lack of an inclusive process pushes youth to engage with or join the ethnic army (see box). In Sierra Leone, young people are frustrated with the government. A 21-year-old man from Makeni said: *"To be candid with you, those who were employed during the period of the Ebola are now worse off than some of us. In fact they are now begging us money."* This dissatisfaction with the government is considered a real risk to stability.

Efforts to integrate youth into other policy areas are under way in Plateau State, **Nigeria**, where a Bureau for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation was set up in 2016. It is to implement a range of peacebuilding and early response activities, specifically targeting women, youth and community leaders for training on peacebuilding and conflict resolution. However, since the state sees young people as potentially violent actors, they are mainly treated as in need of peacebuilding training rather than as *partners* in designing a peacebuilding infrastructure. This overlooks young people's strategies for bridging social divisions. The Bureau has until now not tried to engage with vigilante groups and their apparent role in addressing inter-religious tensions. Since vigilantism is mainly associated with policing tasks, groups have had training in policing and intelligence gathering, but have not been exposed to gender and peacebuilding training.

In all three contexts, the young people interviewed expressed their frustration at a lack of influence and impact at the national level, in some cases stating their complete unawareness of any national programmes aimed at youth. As one young Sierra Leonean man put it: *"I'm not aware of any programme at national level that is supporting youth advocacy at community or district level. If there is any, they should have let us know because I'm also part of vibrant youth groups in the district."*[71] Civil society actors supported this perspective, suggesting that whilst the Sierra Leonean government's focus on youth was a positive move, so far the implementation of policies had been disjointed and overly politicised.

SENG RA: A FEMALE PEACE ACTIVIST IN MYANMAR

Seng Ra is a 28-year old woman from Shan State. It is one of the areas that has ongoing conflict involving different ethnic militias and the government army. When Seng Ra was 16 she joined a local youth group. In 2010 the groups decided that the Shan, Ta'ang and Kachin ethnic youth groups should work together. Initially they collaborated with political parties, but then realised they needed to be non-partisan in order to work across different youth groups: "We wanted to have[a] collective voice and to reclaim the rights of ethnic people. We didn't want to be caught in what the political groups want – it's about what young people want." The group set up the Ethnic Youth Network around 2013. Up until then, only the Burmese had youth organisations operating at national level. Seng Ra felt these were dominating the youth space and were under the influence of the government. In Shan State, she is involved in negotiating between the Shan and Ta'ang people to reduce tensions. She says: "People trust me. I have good relations with people. I have always done this and I'm good at it! I am a young woman. Other girls see me and they get involved. … In the groups where men lead, there are more men. More and more women are getting involved. Men have to worry about bringing money into the family, but women are a bit freer. Men are also exhausted by the political situation while for women it's all new. There is an excitement."
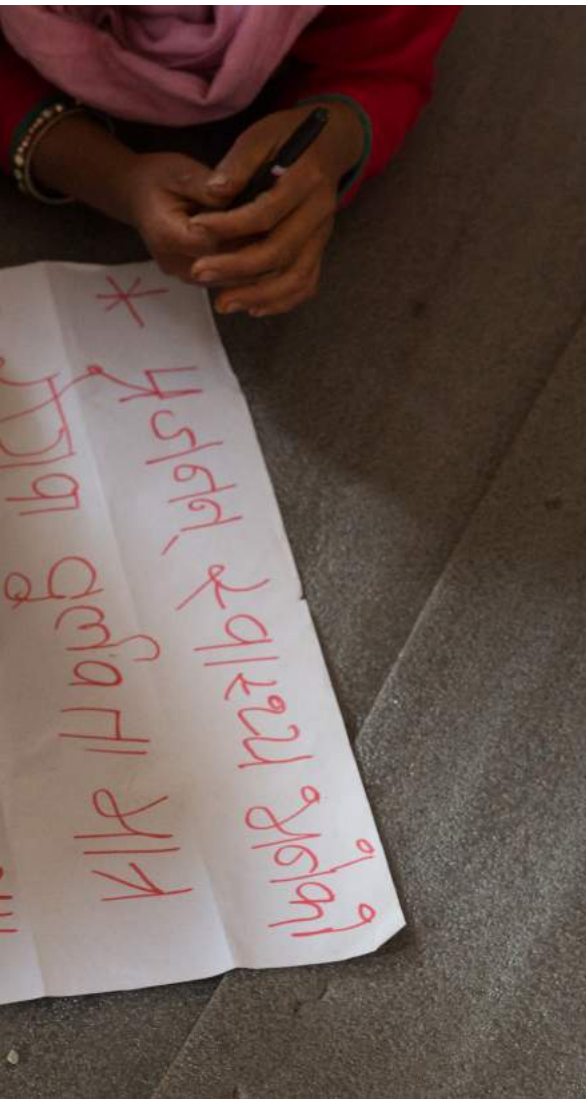
Gender, identity and power

Across the three countries, formal policy processes and institutions like National Youth Councils are exclusive along either regional, ethnic and and/or religious lines, and biased towards adults and men. The substantive engagement of young women is restricted as participation spaces are either completely closed due to patriarchal norms, or intimidating when accessed, and women's issues are not prioritised. Many youth from the poorest families find it challenging to take part in formal processes, facing time constraints as they have to work hard and often work away from the main towns where such processes take place. Since socio-economic marginalisation can overlap with ethnic and religious identity, particularly poor minority groups risk being excluded altogether. Findings point to the often nominal inclusion of young people, and the lack of additional support for more vulnerable youth in these processes.

In terms of gender equity, all the government actors interviewed emphasised that gender sensitivity and equality are extremely important, and that both young men and women can contribute to peace, development and politics. However, in practice, despite growing numbers and visibility, women and minority ethnic groups are under-represented at the higher levels of power. For example, in Nigeria, apart from the official interviewed at the Ministry for Women Affairs and Social Development (MWASD) in Plateau State, none of the interviewees articulated a clear vision and specific gender equality approaches. The MWASD actively engages with women's organisations in the state on issues of peace and security.[72]

In **Sierra Leone**, gender equality remains a pressing policy issue, while middle-aged and

A girl cooks for her peers, Sierra Leone

older men hold the majority of senior positions in the national government and chieftaincies. Government policy and programmes *are* targeting young women directly. The new Female Youth Advancement and Development Programme is the first NYC programme dedicated exclusively to young women, providing a range of services, advice and training. Though these reforms are welcome, many respondents feel that national policies do not go far enough or are not effective.

In **Myanmar**, many young women and youth leaders noted that women's participation in training and forums relating to peace is on the rise. Traditionally, politics is very much the realm of elderly men and this dominance continues, but space is opening. *"There are now two women involved in the National Peace Process, up from zero,"* commented one NGO worker.[73] A few young women noted that for women, politics is new. *"Men are very exhausted by the political situation, but for us we are very interested in this new thing!"* [74] Participation of young women, though not equal

> ## "Obviously women are being marginalised… even in the area of councillors, out of 34 wards, we only have two women as councillors, so we're really being marginalised."
>
> Female community advocate, Sierra Leone

> **"When they have chiefdom meetings, women are not allowed because they believe that women are not part of development and should stay in the kitchen."**
>
> Female activist, Sierra Leone

to that of men, is surprisingly high, including amongst the leadership of youth organisations.

In all three countries, the nominal inclusion of youth ignores diversity and hierarchies among young people. Ethnic and religious discrimination on the part of the state is a major barrier to accessing political spaces, and causes divisions between youth and their networks. As this informant discusses, even elected young people in the NYC in Sierra Leone face being used as proxies by political elites, and ethnic discrimination: *"If for example the chief is a Fullah by tribe, he would try by all possible means to select a Fullah person as the chairman of the council."* In **Myanmar**, political divisions between pragmatists and 'hardliners' in Kachin State divided youth civil society organisations and their strategies for national level engagement. Those who had attended civil society consultations on the new National Youth Policy reported that many youth see it as a government-sponsored forum that will exclude ethnic youth. At national level, the same divisions are at play between the

Burmese-dominated National Youth Congress and the National Ethnic Youth Alliance.

Intergenerational tensions strongly overlapped with resentment against patrimonial politics in **Sierra Leone**. Youth commented they are finding elders, chiefs and those already in power blocking their way. One flashpoint was the recent deaths of two young protestors in Koinadugu, who were killed by police forces when they cracked down on youth protests against the relocation of a youth village, a government programme for youth empowerment supported by millions of dollars of international aid. Though local authorities attributed the violence to a misunderstanding or rumour, respondents saw the incident as part of a wider failure to integrate young people more directly into decision-making processes over the distribution of youth resources, and lack of communication about how funds are used.

Impact and how change happens

Respondents in this study felt that inclusive policies and processes were seen as critical for peace and development. However, the evidence suggests that young people tend to be only nominally included in formal processes and that youth-focused institutions are exclusive and at risk of becoming politicised. Findings from this study offer insights into what contributes to a more critical inclusion and effective engagement of young people, and the kind of processes that need to accompany formal youth participation.

Findings suggest that more **vulnerable youth need additional support** to participate effectively in formal processes. In **Myanmar** women's groups (for all ages) have strengthened considerably since 2011, in part due to considerable donor support. Female activists in Myanmar noted that participating in public events was easier when they were segregated from men, offering them space to build their confidence before engaging in mixed spaces. As is the case for informal youth action, visible **female activists** and **role models** help young women gain confidence and contribute to slowly changing norms about the participation of young women. One of the female youth researchers in **Sierra Leone** had helped occupy the Parliament building as part of an International Day of the Girl worldwide initiative to promote female role models as part of Plan International's *Because I am a Girl* campaign. The actions of these activists are thought to have contributed to some younger men in Sierra Leone becoming more flexible in their attitudes and working with a growing cadre of young female activists. This kind of collaboration across gender is more likely to build a constituency for gender equality.

In addition to building the political capacities of young people, specific activities targeted **public discourses** to change social norms around the participation of young women. For example, public events like the International Day of the Girl contributed to a momentum for women's empowerment in Sierra Leone and have motivated both younger and older women's activists. The CBO-run LEH WE TALK [Let Us Talk] initiative encourages women-only political spaces and respect between genders during discussions, and has proved highly popular in giving women the confidence to join political discussions and processes.

The extent to which youth initiatives and organisations have the **political space** to dialogue with state institutions is seen to shape the extent of their impact. The coordination between police and vigilante leaders in **Nigeria's** Plateau State is enabled by state recognition of the scale and legitimacy of vigilantism. In **Myanmar**, where authorities are more suspicious of youth mobilisation, a small group of well-connected youth leaders from the two youth networks actively used their connections with government and CSO leaders to be included in policy processes. Thus the National Youth Congress has negotiated its involvement in the drafting of the NYP, and the National Ethnic Youth Alliance gained observer status in the National Peace Process conferences. The history of youth mobilisation in Myanmar alongside international pressure on the new government has also helped to achieve this. This underlines the importance of context and **power analysis** as the basis for developing strategies for engaging with state actors.

Findings from **Myanmar** illustrate how much time and resources it takes to enhance representation and inclusion. Loose networks of autonomous organisations work in different regions and states, keeping in communication with the capital. It is a challenge for these organisations to even meet each other due to restrictions on how donor funding can be used, and having broad coalitions was key to becoming included in policy processes. Both youth networks made strong attempts to include all ethnic and religious groups; less so, different socio-economic groups. It is certainly the case that most ordinary youth are not involved with these networks' work and ethno-religious divisions remain a challenge. These new organisations lack experience, can be disorganised and riven with personal and ideological differences. With this in mind the nominal inclusion of youth by the state is an immense achievement in itself, while it remains to be seen how much they will actually be listened to.

CONCLUSIONS

Adolescent girls joke together, Niger

The findings of this study underline that while violent conflict and instability are key factors affecting the security and wellbeing of youth, young men and women are particularly concerned with the ripple effects fragility has for their mobility, livelihood and educational opportunities, and (reproductive) health. Ultimately, diminished opportunities will affect their opportunities and capacities to attain the milestones of adulthood, such as marriage, and their ability to sustain parents and families. Clearly, young women remain the most affected group, while more marginalised youth and religious and ethnic minorities are disproportionately affected. The study found overwhelming evidence of the multiple ways in which young women and men make life liveable for themselves and others, and mitigate fragility in non-violent ways. Through subtle, everyday actions that can easily go unnoticed, they contribute to peace, security and development, sometimes having significant impact. However, youth initiatives do not necessarily address power and gender dynamics and may even reproduce the norms and barriers that sustain gender inequality. They may also not have impact at higher levels of governance, or take local initiatives to scale. While it is also key not to romanticise all forms of youth action and to be aware of the more obscure forms such as vigilantism, it is still important to understand how these embedded actors have gained legitimacy. It is this embeddedness and legitimacy that the more formal, national processes are lacking.

Youth are not given high priority in many fragile and conflict-affected states, despite the huge implications fragility has for their lives. Young people are frustrated with their lack of influence and impact at the national level, and many 'classic' participation challenges such as social exclusion and gender bias limit their effective involvement. The development of new national youth policies or youth empowerment programmes may offer entry points for youth engagement with state actors, and momentum for youth civil society to rally around a host of youth issues. However, often youth engagement is not sustained, while youth-focused institutions are not the sole answer to effective youth involvement. These challenges underline the need for approaches that target both state and youth civil society organisations in order to enhance youth participation, and to use the lessons learned in any process that evolves from UNSCR 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security.

> "The conflict has changed our dreams. I would have stayed and worked in the fields at home. I would have got married and have children by now. I never would have thought about having a different job. Everything is different."
>
> Displaced young woman, 18, Myanmar

CASE STUDY: SIERRA LEONE

SIERRA LEONE

MAKENI

After a decade of civil war which ended in 2002, and despite being ranked as 'on alert' status on the fragility index[75] (at number 34), prior to the 2014 Ebola outbreak the overall picture for Sierra Leone was gradually improving, resulting in a year-on-year decrease in its overall fragility ranking. However, the impact of the 2014 Ebola outbreak[76] has accelerated the downturn in the economy, and the recently adopted austerity measures supported by the IMF and World Bank are seeing rapid rises in utility fees and the cost of living, and simmering discontent amongst disenfranchised groups, especially young people, mirroring the socio-economic and political conditions which preceded the earlier civil war. Based in the Northern regional capital Makeni, this study mapped youth responses to fragility across the region by engaging with both young people from different age groups, youth leaders and activists and a range of civil society actors, as well as actors involved in local, regional and national governance.

EXPERIENCE OF FRAGILITY

The role of young people, especially young men, continues to dominate discussions of Sierra Leone's development strategy and is part of an ongoing policy focus on youth employment and skills training which is linked to maintaining national stability. Youth were heavily impacted by the civil war, as victims of the armed conflict, but also as armed actors, as volunteers or forcibly recruited. The role of youth in the civil war, including factors which led to their mobilisation, was specifically examined by the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission. After the war, many young men took on informal jobs such as driving motorbike taxis (Okada) but a large number of young men remain un/ underemployed and are subject to media attacks, police brutality and hierarchical traditional authority. Added to this the 2014 Ebola crisis has caused economic conditions to worsen and has heightened both political and social tensions in the run-up to the 2018 elections.

YOUTH EXPERIENCES OF FRAGILITY AND ITS IMPACT ON THE LIFE COURSE

Both young men and women expressed how difficulties with education, livelihoods and general wellbeing had increased during the Ebola crisis and how, for young women especially, the restrictions on mobility and independence heavily impacted their education and heightened their everyday vulnerability. For all young people, but especially younger boys and girls, although education was seen as a vital part of transitioning to adulthood, many faced several challenges in accessing or completing their education including their inability to pay school fees, poorly qualified teachers, corporal punishment, corruption (cash for grades) and infrastructural issues around access.

For older young men and women, the Ebola crisis also increased their difficulties in gaining a livelihood as restricted mobility reinforced challenges in finding custom or work. For most young women finding a job was extremely difficult, and had to be balanced with the demands of family, schooling and childcare whilst navigating a risk-filled world of exploitation and potential vulnerability. However, some women were challenging gender boundaries in order to find work and the government was actively targeting young women to join traditionally male-dominated occupations (such as motorbike taxis).

For many young women, their already precarious situation was compounded during the Ebola crisis by immobility, isolation and a lack of education. Teenage pregnancy, early marriage and secret abortion increased during the outbreak as young women were forced to become more reliant on both young men and older relatives for support, a situation compounded by the breakdown of their already limited access to health care. This also made them more vulnerable to ongoing issues such as FGM and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Women from minority ethnic and religious groups with more rigid ideas around early marriage were also more isolated and more vulnerable, as were other discriminated against groups such as young disabled people and often stigmatised Ebola survivors.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN EVERYDAY PEACE

During the Ebola crisis, many young people played a vital but unheralded role in helping bridge the gap between international and national aid actors and local communities by mobilising to raise awareness of the realities of the Ebola virus in their own towns and villages. This unreported positive action was the result of a long history of 'DIY development' and activism stemming from a network of civil society spaces, mechanisms and actors who were initially empowered in the wake of the civil war. They were often encouraged both by international actors such as the YMCA and Plan International, and local CBOs such as the youth discussion spaces called 'Attaya Base'. Older, experienced youth activists acting as mentors and community leaders were especially critical in creating a solid network of everyday, informal youth actors were tackling youth issues in their own communities.

Gender activism was a vital part of these networks, though gender activists faced issues in getting their voices heard. Young people from the Youth Advocacy Network (YACAN), for example, discussed how they had been involved in Plan International's Girl Power project as well as running a weekly radio discussion show for young people, with a special emphasis on issues affecting young women's lives. However, despite these very positive gains, some of our informants relayed how difficult it was for women to access positions of power more widely and even to participate in spaces designed for the purpose of participation.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN NATIONAL PROCESSES

After the protracted civil war ended in 2002, the role of youth was placed at the centre of the 'Truth and Reconciliation' agenda, resulting in a series of policies and programmes dedicated to getting young people into employment, education and productive citizenship roles. The 2011 National Youth Commission (NAYCOM) and the Ministry of Youth Affairs, created in 2013, signified the government's intention to increase education, employment and training opportunities for young people.

Despite this concerted focus on youth issues, young people reported their disappointment in some aspects of youth policy and programming and reported low levels of engagement with national-scale projects. One flashpoint widely discussed was the recent deaths of two young protestors in Koinadugu which occurred after protests against the removal of a youth village training centre became heated. Though local authorities attributed the violence to a misunderstanding or rumour, young people we spoke to saw the incident as part of a wider failure of youth policy. However, young people also reported that they had had interactions with both local and national government officials on the Whatsapp social media platform, though they also complained that the level and speed of responses were uneven.

Photo: Girls attend school in Bo District, Sierra Leone

RECOMMENDATIONS

Girl at rehabilitation centre, Ethiopia

1. FOR POLICYMAKERS AND DONORS

- **Take an evidence-based approach:** Neither policy nor programme interventions should be underpinned by presumptions about the drivers and social norms which lead young men and women to take on roles as 'entrepreneurs of violence' or as 'peace-builders'; nor should assumed roles be used to justify the exclusion of young men or women from processes. **Invest in research** (including longitudinal studies) **to better understand the drivers which lead young men and women to take on particular roles during periods of fragility and armed conflict** to support more effective and targeted interventions to prevent violence and build peace.

- **Recognise that youth are already addressing fragility and building peace – invest in this youth agency, including in line with the Grand Bargain:** Intervention strategies should invest in understanding youth's existing agency in responding to fragility, and support and build up from these interventions. Donors should significantly increase the direct support provided to youth-led organisations and local organisations working with young people, in line with commitments in the Grand Bargain, along with targeted actions to address the root causes of fragility and conflict.

- **Address gender inequality in policy processes:** Policy actors need to recognise and address patriarchy and gender bias at the outset of formal processes addressing fragility, and seek to create terms of engagement that are enabling for young women, for instance through quotas, debating rules about respect and active listening, allowing women to speak first, and supporting women-only dialogue forums in advance of formal process so they can strengthen their agency and voice.

- **Build momentum on UN Security Council Resolution 2250 and strengthen its focus on young women.**

  - Young people are often sidelined from important policy and development processes if these are not 'earmarked' for youth, even if they have direct impact on their lives. UNSC Resolution 2250 is an important step in the recognition of the importance of youth participation in peacebuilding at the local, national, regional and international levels.

  - Policymakers must use the Progress Study of Security Council Resolution 2250 to translate the resolution's objectives into clear targets with milestones to ensure accountability.

  - Efforts to promote UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security are often insufficiently age-sensitive, focusing on the inclusion of adult women. Meanwhile, efforts to promote UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security are often insufficiently gender-sensitive, focusing on the inclusion of young men. As a result, there is a real risk that the needs and voices of young women may fall through the gap between these two agendas.

Photo: Girl speaks at refugee camp, Rwanda

2. FOR THE UK GOVERNMENT

- **Reflect DFID's approach to engaging youth as agents and advocates of development, as outlined in the *Youth Agenda*[77], in the Government's wider foreign policy.**

  - Consider convening an informal working group with representatives from relevant departments and members of the international community to share evidence and develop best practice on supporting youth agency, including in conflict and fragile settings.

- **The UK Government should prioritise the importance of understanding, supporting and investing in adolescent girls' and young women's agency.** Measures should:

  - **Change the narrative around girls and young women:** ensure that as well as recognising the gendered experience of women in situations of fragility and conflict, the characterisation of girls and women must be as more than victims and their agency and contribution to transforming fragility and building peace must be recognised.

  - Recognise that girls and women experience discrimination and exclusion as a result of the intersection of multiple characteristics including gender and age – **ensure gender context analyses include an age dimension.**

  - **Fund research into understanding the existing agency of adolescent girls and women in transforming fragility and peacebuilding (including providing services, preventing violence and promoting more peaceful societies), and strengthen and invest in this agency through policy adoption and investment in targeted programming.** This could also include greater investment in adolescent girls' and young women's leadership programmes across all WPS focus countries.

- **A Foreign Office ministerial role should be assigned the key responsibility of promoting the rights and interests of young people in UK foreign policy,** with an explicit focus on ensuring their participation in, and meaningful contribution to, the promotion of peace and security.

Photo: Village meeting, Sierra Leone

3. PROGRAMMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS

How to support youth engagement in fragile and conflict-affected contexts

- **Address the structural barriers to participation:** Recognise that capacity building alone won't enable young people to engage meaningfully in processes to build peace. Integrate interventions into programmes which address the patriarchal norms and traditional generational relationships of 'power over' which limit and exclude young women and men.

- **Support youth inclusion in _all_ relevant processes:** Young people are often sidelined from important reform, transition and peace processes if these are not 'earmarked' for youth, despite such reform directly impacting on their lives. Do not silo youth participation and 'youth issues' into Youth Policies and National Youth Councils.

- **Donors and INGO partners can play an important role in opening up spaces and supporting youth participation in national processes:** It is important for external actors to systematically reflect on their interlocutor role, ensuring they act as enablers and facilitators of youth participation, and do not occupy actual or limited emergent space for youth activists and youth organisations.

- **Build an understanding among youth:** Taking cues from everyday peace actions, programmes need to actively promote understanding among different identity groups to build bridges across social and political divisions.

- **Critical inclusion:** Youth are not a homogenous group. Be aware of power dynamics and gender inequality and the complex divisions among young people. It is critical that consideration is given to who is excluded and included – to ensure that youth participation doesn't exacerbate divisions or reinforce the status quo.

- **Gender equality and inclusiveness within youth programming:** Dedicated programme activities should be developed to transform unequal gender power relations and eliminate the stigma and discrimination that limit the participation of women and marginalised groups, including by engaging men and boys in positive masculinity programming. Programmes need to make use of female mentors, role models, and women-only spaces to help build assets, resources, confidence and opportunities for girls and young women. Through peer education, young men and women need to collaborate to discuss and challenge patriarchy in their own communities and at the national level.

- **Learn from and support existing youth actions that are challenging gender norms:** Taking cues from their everyday actions, programmes must seek to understand how young women already negotiate and challenge restrictive norms and mobilise for action; and how young men have come to support young women, and identify where they need support.

- **Use power analysis to broker links to state actors:** For most youth, it remains a challenge to engage with state actors and powerful non-state authorities. Youth civil society and youth leaders need to be supported to develop clear strategies for engagement based on power analysis, in order to a) find allies within the state and help open up space for youth participation; b) maximise the use of the existing political space to negotiate youth issues; and c) articulate barriers and risks to linking up with state actors. Through facilitated action research, young people can build a shared understanding of youth issues and the power dynamics behind them, and gather evidence to confidently engage in dialogue and advocacy with state and community actors.

Photo: Girl walks to school, Cameroon

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