iPYP
Investing and Partnering with Youth for Peace

The Missing Partner?

Youth perspectives across regions on engaging the private sector for peace

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Across diverse contexts, youth-led organisations and initiatives continue to play important roles in strengthening social cohesion, civic participation and peacebuilding, often while navigating political instability, inequality and shrinking civic space. Despite increased recognition globally — including through the United Nations Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda — of youth's positive contributions to conflict prevention and sustaining peace, youth-led peacebuilding initiatives remain significantly underfunded and are often excluded from traditional funding sources.

At the same time, private-sector actors are increasingly shaping development, governance and social cohesion processes through corporate social responsibility (CSR), environmental, social and governance (ESG) strategies, impact investing and territorial engagement initiatives. However, meaningful collaboration between youth-led peacebuilding organisations and the private sector remains underdeveloped, with limited structured models, tools and frameworks to support meaningful and long-term partnerships.

This synthesis report presents findings from regional analyses and case studies developed by the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, in its role of housing Investing and Partnering with Youth for Peace (IPYP), and in collaboration with youth researchers across Southeast Asia, Latin America and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), as well as in Sweden and the United States.

The project emerged from ongoing conversations with youth peacebuilders and private-sector actors. Young people consistently identified the private sector as an important but underutilised actor in supporting youth-led peacebuilding. They stressed the need to better understand existing partnership models, document successful experiences and identify practical lessons for building more meaningful and equitable collaboration between youth-led initiatives and private-sector actors. Private-sector actors have also expressed an interest in working with and supporting youth-led peacebuilding, but lack knowledge on how to develop and implement these kinds of partnerships. They asked for examples of past and ongoing youth-private partnerships, to learn from others' experiences. The research examines how youth-led organisations and initiatives across these contexts engage with private-sector actors, documenting successful partnerships, key challenges and lessons learned. This synthesis is complemented by individual case studies, which will be published separately to provide more detailed insights into specific partnership experiences and contexts.

Despite different contextual realities, the findings reveal a common set of challenges in establishing and sustaining youth-private partnerships. Youth-led organisations and initiatives continue to face limited access to sustainable and flexible funding, while efforts to build meaningful youth-private partnerships are often constrained by unequal power dynamics, low levels of trust between civil society and the private sector and the limited institutionalisation of youth–private sector collaboration mechanisms. Importantly, the findings also highlight that youth-led organisations and initiatives increasingly view the private sector not simply as a source of funding, but as a potential partner capable of contributing knowledge, networks, legitimacy, innovation and long-term sustainability to peacebuilding efforts.

Who is the private sector?
For the purposes of this synthesis, the private sector encompasses a diverse range of actors, including local businesses, chambers of commerce, social entreprises, corporate foundations, national companies and multinational organisations. The types of private-sector actors discussed varies across regions, ranging from banks and chambers of commerce in the MENA region, automobile and water and sanitasation companies in Latin America and multinational corporations, social enterprises and impact investors in Southeast Asia.

Peacebuilders are individuals, groups or organisations working to prevent, mitigate or transform conflict and to build the conditions for lasting peace. They engage all levels of society (from grassroots communities to national and international institutions) and often address the underlying drivers of conflict, such as inequality, injustice and exclusion.

Peacebuilding refers to a broad set of efforts and processes aimed at creating sustainable peace by addressing the root causes of conflict, supporting reconciliation, strengthening institutions and promoting social cohesion. It involves both formal and informal actors and priorities inclusive, context-specific approaches that empower affected communities.

The Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda recognises young people as active agents in peacebuilding, emphasising their role in conflict prevention, resolution and sustaining peace. Since the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015) and its subsequent resolutions, the YPS agenda calls on all relevant actors, including governments, multilateral organisations, and the private sector, to increasingly shape global, regional and national peace efforts, recognising the important role the private sector can play in building and sustaining peace.

CSR partnerships refer to a partnership in which a company supports a youth-led or peacebuilding initiative through corporate social responsibility (CSR) resources, including funding, technical expertise, employee volunteering, mentorship, or co-implemented activities. These partnerships are often linked to the company's social impact objectives and may range from short-term project support to longer-term collaborations.

Hybrid organisations are organisations that combine elements of both non-profit and for-profit models to achieve social impact objectives. In the following examples, hybrid organisations helped bridge humanitarian, development, and business approaches by providing technical skills training, entrepreneurship support, business development services, and access to economic opportunities for young people and communities.

Impact-washing is the use of social impact initiatives primarily for branding or reputational purposes, without a meaningful commitment to the people, communities, or outcomes being promoted.

Regional perspectives on youth–private partnerships

Although youth–private partnerships remain relatively underdeveloped across all regions and countries studied, the findings reveal important differences across these contexts in how these partnerships are understood, approached and operationalised.

In the MENA region, youth organisations largely view the private sector as an increasingly important actor in response to shrinking civic space and declining Official Development Assistance (ODA), something also echoed by Latin American youth. As traditional funding sources become less accessible and predictable, many youth-led initiatives are increasingly turning to the private sector in search of more flexible and locally-embedded forms of support. At the same time, collaboration remains largely ad hoc and short-term, often lacking institutionalised frameworks for engagement. Youth noted that private-sector actors are themselves affected by conflict and instability in the region, creating potential incentives to support more peaceful and stable environments.

In Latin America, youth–private sector engagement is framed more explicitly around co-responsibility, territorial peacebuilding and governance. While the region does not experience conventional armed conflict between states, youth peacebuilding initiatives operate within broader structural challenges linked to inequality, organised crime, shrinking civic space and weak institutional trust. Youth in Latin America emphasised the need to develop long-term frameworks for collaboration, that aim to redistribute power, strengthen civic participation and embed youth engagement into public policy and territorial development processes.

Young people in Southeast Asia underscored different partnership typologies and innovative financing mechanisms. These included CSR partnerships focused on funding and in-kind support; capacity-building partnerships that provide mentorship and technical expertise; market-access partnerships that connect youth initiatives to professional networks and supply chains; social enterprise models that combine peacebuilding and livelihoods; and broader multi-stakeholder partnerships involving governments, foundations, businesses and youth organisations. Youth in this region also noted emerging financing mechanisms such as ESG-aligned investments and impact investing. While CSR partnerships remain among the most common forms of engagement, youth expressed an interest in models that provide longer-term, more flexible support and greater opportunities for youth leadership.

Despite some differences across these regions, several common findings emerge:

- Youth emphasised that peaceful, inclusive and socially cohesive communities benefit not only young people and communities, but also businesses by creating more stable and predictable operating environments. This was frequently presented as a business case for greater private sector investment in peacebuilding and social cohesion initiatives;
- Youth-led organisations and initiatives face significant barriers in accessing sustainable funding from private-sector actors;
- Partnerships with the private sector often remain short-term and transactional;
- Youth peacebuilders consistently seek recognition as co-creators and strategic actors rather than beneficiaries or implementers.

Approaches to youth-private sector engagement

Across regions, young people highlighted that youth–private sector engagement does not follow a single approach. Rather, partnerships emerge through different entry points depending on the local context and needs, existing opportunities for engagement and the priorities of both youth and private-sector partners. The case studies identified several recurring approaches through which youth-led organisations and initiatives engage with the private sector.

Multi-stakeholder capacity-building partnerships

Several organisations and initiatives emphasised wanting partnerships designed as co-creation rather than philanthropy alone.

In Argentina, Asociación Conciencia developed long-term partnerships where companies contribute not only funding, but also technical expertise, territorial connections and operational support. Initiatives such as El Agua en Debate involved companies, schools and local actors jointly designing educational and civic-participation activities linked to water governance and environmental sustainability.

Similarly, in the Philippines, the Bangsamoro Young Leaders Program (BYLP) demonstrated how private-sector actors, hybrid organisations operating at the intersection of business and development, foundations and government institutions can collectively support youth-led social entrepreneurship and community peacebuilding through technical skills training, business development support, mentorship, grants and access to professional networks. This case study exemplifies a multi-stakeholder ecosystem in which different actors contribute complementary resources, expertise and legitimacy.

Across these examples, partnerships became more sustainable when youth initiatives were treated as equal partners involved in project design, implementation and decision making.

Intermediary-facilitated engagement approach

In highly fragile settings such as Yemen, engagement often began through small-scale and practical forms of collaboration. Kayan Foundation relied on intermediaries such as universities and chambers of commerce to facilitate introductions and establish legitimacy with private-sector actors.

Rather than pursuing large financial investments from the outset, partnerships focused on in-kind contributions including training spaces, logistical support, expertise and networks. Small pilot initiatives helped demonstrate credibility and build trust over time. This model illustrates how youth-led organisations in fragile contexts can use trusted intermediaries and small-scale pilot initiatives to establish relationships with the private sector and lay the groundwork for longer-term partnerships, particularly where access to funding is limited and private-sector actors may be cautious about direct financial investment.

Building diversified partnership portfolios

The Stears in the Kashmir region in India demonstrates how early validation and diversified partnerships can reinforce one another. The initial development of proof of concept opened an opportunity to partner with UNICEF, eventually leading to scaling-up the project to 15 more schools. This experience, in turn, led to additional partnerships with actors such as Samsung India, Amazon India, Nestlé India and others. Together, these partnerships provided complementary forms of support funding, technical expertise, infrastructure and institutional support while reducing dependence on any single actor. This approach increased organisational flexibility and resilience while enabling the organisation to maintain alignment with its values and long-term objectives.

Rather than relying on a single corporate sponsor, The Stears strategically developed a portfolio of CSR partnerships aligned with different aspects of its work. Samsung India supported digital literacy and design-thinking initiatives, Amazon India contributed to psychosocial support programming, Nestlé India supported the scaling of teacher training and UNICEF provided early validation and institutional credibility. This diversified approach enabled the organisation to expand its programmes while maintaining alignment with its values and long-term objectives.

Partnership readiness and trust

Youth-led organisations emphasised that they frequently invest in building credibility, demonstrating impact and establishing relationships before more established partnerships become possible.

IBTIKAR, a Palestinian youth-led organisation, demonstrated how partnership readiness can be built incrementally through individual credibility and demonstrated results. The organisation's founder initially engaged development partners through her own professional expertise, established relationships and credibility within the sector. Early consulting assignments and small-scale collaborations enabled potential partners to observe the quality of their work firsthand, gradually building trust in the organisation itself.

A similar dynamic emerged in Colombia through Foro Región Central, where the organisation prioritised dialogue, relationship-building and the identification of shared interests with potential private-sector partners. At the time of the research, the organisation was exploring a collaboration with an automobile company to jointly design an energy transition laboratory for women employed by the company. Youth also noted that distrust between youth actors and parts of the private sector had been reinforced following the 2019 social unrest, highlighting the importance of rebuilding trust and creating spaces for dialogue before collaboration can emerge.

Together, these cases suggest that credibility, trust and relationship-building are often necessary enabling conditions for youth–private sector engagement, particularly where partnerships have not previously existed or where relationships have been shaped by mistrust. While researchers sought to engage both youth-led organisations and private sector partners in interviews, only youth-led organisations and peacebuilding actors participated. The findings presented in this section should therefore be understood primarily from their perspective.

Common challenges across regions

Despite contextual differences, the case studies revealed that youth face similar challenges in engaging with private sector actors:

Power asymmetries

Some organisations described persistent imbalances between donors, private-sector actors and youth-led organisations and initiatives. Youth were frequently treated as implementers rather than equal partners, limiting meaningful participation in decision-making processes.

In Southeast Asia, young people highlighted the risk of the private sector exaggerating, fabricating, or misrepresenting the positive results of an intervention (impact-washing); showcasing stories of their collaboration with youth-led peacebuilders despite the youth peacebuilders receiving little to no tangible support (extractive storytelling); and unequal governance structures in which corporate visibility and branding priorities overshadow locally-defined peacebuilding objectives.

Limited access to sustained private funding and financing

Across regions, youth-led organisations and initiatives faced difficulties accessing sustainable and flexible funding and financing. While short-term grants, sponsorships, and one-off contributions were often available, these rarely provided the continuity needed to support long-term peacebuilding and youth engagement efforts. Small organisations often struggled with complex application procedures, fiduciary requirements and expectations around institutional capacity.

Youth from the MENA region found that most partnerships remain short-term and project-based rather than strategic and long-term. Similarly, Latin American organisations highlighted how short funding cycles undermine continuity, organisational learning and territorial trust-building processes. As a result, initiatives were frequently forced to scale down, pause activities, or seek new funding before even finalising the ongoing project.

Trust deficits and reputational risks

Several cases highlighted low levels of trust between civil society actors and private-sector actors, particularly in contexts affected by conflict, inequality or political polarisation.

Organisations also stressed the importance of ethical safeguards and context-sensitive due diligence. In Yemen, Kayan Foundation highlighted the need to avoid partnerships with actors linked to armed groups or harmful political interests. In Latin America, concerns included extractive corporate practices, weak accountability and the risk that partnerships prioritise reputational benefits over meaningful community impact.

Operational constraints in fragile contexts

Youth-led peacebuilding initiatives across regions operate in highly constrained environments shaped by bureaucratic barriers, political sensitivities, weak institutional coordination and shrinking civic space.

In Kashmir, for example, negotiating agreements with schools often involved lengthy bureaucratic processes and repeated engagement with school administrations, particularly where mental health and peace education were considered politically sensitive topics. In Bangsamoro, organisations faced difficulties operating in remote locations due to limited transport opportunities to and from these areas, as well as limited infrastructure.

Youth in Latin America and MENA both highlighted the growing criminalisation of activism and shrinking spaces for youth participation as major barriers to sustain peace.

Language barriers

Youth highlighted the significant effort required to translate between community priorities, peacebuilding objectives and private-sector interests. The private sector often lacked familiarity with peacebuilding terms and approaches or perceived peacebuilding as unsounds business or investment strategy and difficult to measure. As a result, youth frequently framed peacebuilding in terms that resonated with corporate priorities such as education, employability, wellbeing, entrepreneurship or ESG commitments.

In Kashmir, The Stears secured support from corporate actors by linking peace education and psychosocial wellbeing to measurable educational outcomes. In Bangsamoro, youth-led social entrepreneurship initiatives connected peacebuilding objectives with livelihoods and local economic development. Similarly, Asociación Conciencia built partnerships around shared concerns related to environmental governance, civic participation and territorial development.

Key cross-regional lessons

Several important lessons learnt emerged from the case studies and regional analyses:

- Sustainable youth–private sector partnerships are most effective when young people are treated as partners, co-creators and decision makers rather than beneficiaries. Across contexts, meaningful participation and shared ownership emerged as key conditions for successful collaboration.

- Youth-led organisations and initiatives require more than short-term project funding. Mentorship, leadership development, institutional strengthening, technical support and access to professional networks were often valued as highly as financial contributions.

- Trusted intermediaries can play a critical role in bridging gaps between youth communities and private-sector actors. Universities, chambers of commerce, foundations, multilateral organisations and government actors can help facilitate dialogue, trust and collaboration.

- Small pilot initiatives can provide important entry points for collaboration, particularly in fragile or low-trust environments. Early results help build credibility, demonstrate value and create pathways for longer-term engagement.

- Private-sector engagement in peacebuilding is most effective when grounded in local realities and supported by clear ethical safeguards. Partnerships driven primarily by branding, visibility or reputational gains risk reinforcing unequal power dynamics and undermining trust.

- Youth-led organisations often act as connectors between communities and private-sector actors. Beyond implementing projects, they help translate local priorities into actionable initiatives and ensure external resources align with community needs.

- Diversifying partnerships with different actors (corporates, local businesses, foundations, etc.) can reduce dependence on any single donor or actor while increasing resilience and access to complementary forms of support.

Youth-private partnerships beyond conflict-affected contexts: perspectives from Sweden and the United States

To complement the project, two mini-case studies were conducted in Sweden and the United States. While these countries differ significantly from the contexts examined in the main study, the cases provided an opportunity to explore how youth–private sector engagement functions in non-conflict-affected contexts, while identifying lessons that may be relevant across settings. The findings reinforce many of the same lessons highlighted by young people in Latin America, MENA and Southeast Asia. At the same time, perspectives from Sweden and the United States provide additional insights into how youth–private sector engagement can address forms of exclusion and marginalisation that persist in more stable environments.

War Child Sweden, a branch of the international non-governmental organisation, has a long-standing partnership with Scania. This partnership demonstrates how private sector engagement can contribute not only funding, but also mentorship, professional networks and access to employment pathways for young people facing barriers to social and economic inclusion. This programme responds to challenges experienced by newly-arrived and migrant youth in Södertälje municipality, including limited access to professional networks, language barriers and difficulties navigating education and labour markets. The success of the Södertälje programme has also informed efforts to adapt and replicate the model in other contexts, including through collaboration between Scania and War Child Colombia, where implementation is undertaken in partnership with a local youth organisation.

Similarly, the United States case highlights the role private-sector partnerships can play in strengthening organisational resilience and expanding access to networks and opportunities. Generations for Peace USA partners with a philanthropic foundation which provides not only financial support, but also access to leadership development, governance participation, peer networks and strategic connections. At the same time, the case underscores the risks associated with overreliance on a single funding partner, demonstrating the importance of diversification even where partnerships are highly aligned and supportive.

Together, these cases suggest that youth–private sector engagement goes beyond financing. While many of the same challenges identified by youth in conflict-affected contexts—unequal access to networks, opportunities, decision-making spaces and unequal power dynamics—remain relevant, in contexts like Sweden and the United States the challenge may be less about securing private sector engagement and more about determining what form that engagement should take. Questions of co-creation, power-sharing, long-term commitment and safeguarding youth interests become particularly important. The findings also demonstrate that marginalisation and exclusion are not limited to conflict-affected settings; rather, they manifest differently across contexts, requiring partnership models that are responsive to the specific realities and barriers faced by different groups of young people.

Looking ahead

Youth–private sector partnerships hold important potential for strengthening social cohesion, civic participation and locally-led peacebuilding across diverse contexts.

At a time when traditional funding mechanisms for peacebuilding financing are increasingly constrained, private sector engagement offers opportunities not only for resource mobilisation, but also for innovation, knowledge exchange and long-term sustainability. However, meaningful partnerships require moving beyond transactional or purely philanthropic approaches towards models grounded in equity, trust, co-creation and shared responsibility.

Building on these findings, IPYP will continue facilitating dialogue and relationship building between youth-led organisations and initiatives and private-sector actors, while promoting greater awareness of the roles that youth can play in advancing peace and social cohesion. The case studies and lessons presented in this synthesis are intended not only to inform policy and practice, but also to serve as a practical resource for youth peacebuilders and private sector actors seeking to engage one another and develop more meaningful, equitable and sustainable partnerships. Together, these examples highlight that youth peacebuilders are not simply recipients of investment, but essential actors in shaping more inclusive, resilient and peaceful societies.

About Investing and Partnering with Youth for Peace (IPYP)
Investing and Partnering with Youth for Peace (IPYP) is a multi-stakeholder platform that aims to advance resource mobilisation, meaningful engagement and partnerships between private sector actors and youth-led peacebuilding initiatives. IPYP contributes to these efforts by documenting emerging practices, strengthening dialogue between youth and private-sector actors and building a shared evidence base on youth–private partnerships across regions. IPYP is housed at the Dag Hammarksjöld Foundation.

About the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation
The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation is a non-governmental organisation established in 1962 in memory of the second UN Secretary-General. Building on Dag Hammarskjöld's legacy, the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation works to advance dialogue and evidence-based policy and implementation to support peace and sustainable development.

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