

CASE STUDY

The Stears, India

This case study informs a broader research initiative by Investing and Partnering with Youth for Peace (IPYP), to explore how youth-led organisations engage with private-sector actors to advance peacebuilding and social cohesion in diverse contexts. Drawing on case studies from across Latin America, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, Sweden and the United States, the project identifies common partnership models, enabling factors, challenges and lessons learnt emerging from youth–private sector collaboration. Across the cases, the research highlights the importance of sustainable relationships, locally grounded approaches, trust-building and moving beyond transactional funding towards genuine co-creation.

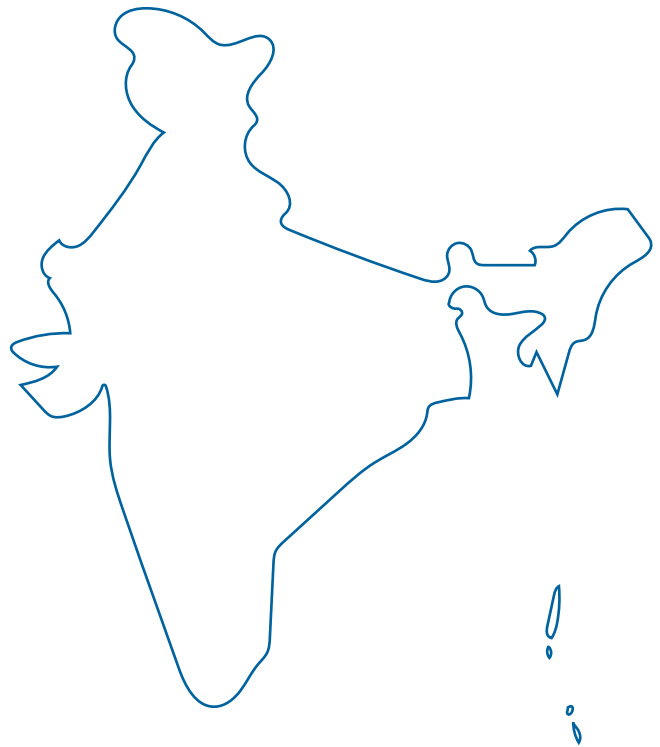
The findings presented in this case study are based on a review of organisational materials, an interview with The Stears team, and a focus group discussion conducted in January 2026 with 15 young people who had participated in The Stears’ programmes. Their reflections provide first-hand perspectives on the opportunities, challenges and impacts of youth–private partnerships in Kashmir.¹

Context

The Kashmir region in India has experienced decades of political tension and recurring violence, disrupting young people’s education, restricting their mobility within the region and to other regions, and limiting access to meaningful jobs. Approximately 55% of the Kashmiri population experiences some form of depression, with the highest rates among those aged 15 to 25.² This environment undermines psychosocial wellbeing, civic participation and educational continuity, creating an urgent need for initiatives that equip young people with the skills, confidence and pathways to build fulfilling futures. At the same time, growing corporate engagement through corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and sustainability programmes has created new opportunities for youth-focused organisations to access resources, skills and partnerships that support education, wellbeing and social inclusion.

The Stears and their engagement with the private sector

The Stears is a youth-led peacebuilding organisation based in Kashmir. The organisation evolved from a photography fellowship and campaign that provided young people with a creative platform to document and share their lived realities, perspectives and experiences through photography and storytelling into a structured initiative at the intersection of education, leadership and social transformation. Its core work centres on the Total Transformers Program (TTP), a four-year school-based model that guides students through a long-term, sequenced developmental pathway. Through reflective learning, students build confidence, curiosity and self-awareness. They are then able to apply these learnings through community engagement, including through peer leadership and mentorship roles within their schools and communities. To strengthen sustainability and local



ownership, the organisation has recently shifted towards teacher-centred delivery, recognising educators as co-facilitators of peace education rather than passive recipients of training.

Exploring approaches to youth-private partnerships

Based on the TTP teacher training component first piloted with UNICEF, The Stears has built a deliberately diverse partnership portfolio that spans corporate actors and community platforms. Samsung India supported a design thinking and digital literacy challenge that reached approximately 1000 students, combining corporate technical resources with youth-led curriculum design. The Stears partnered with Amazon India to deliver 30 psychological support workshops across 10 districts, reaching approximately 800 people with mental health and emotional regulation support. Nestlé India subsequently funded its scale-up. Mahindra Group funded creative engagement initiatives and expansion efforts, drawing on platforms such as DonateKart to mobilise community and corporate contributions for computer labs and other infrastructure. This scale up demonstrates how proof of concept with a multilateral partner can open doors to corporate investment.

What distinguishes this model is The Stears proactive, values-driven approach: the organisation initiated direct outreach to companies, framed its work around measurable outcomes and insisted on alignment around safety and long-term commitment. The result is a diversified funding base that offers flexibility, reduces dependence on any single donor and preserves the youth-led integrity that partners themselves cite as the organisation’s core asset.

Results

Backed by partners including Samsung India, Amazon India and Nestlé India, TTP has scaled to 15 schools, with outcomes showing marked improvements in students' confidence, emotional resilience, critical thinking and conflict resolution skills. In a region where youth-led peacebuilding organisations are routinely excluded from mainstream funding and treated as implements rather than co-creators, The Stears stands out as a model of authentic community-rooted youth leadership.

Key challenges in engaging with private-sector actors

-  **Peace and peacebuilding remain taboo topics for many corporate partners:** The Stears found that some corporate actors were more comfortable funding education, employability, or digital literacy initiatives than programmes explicitly framed as peacebuilding. This required the organisation to demonstrate how peacebuilding outcomes contribute to broader goals such as youth development, wellbeing, leadership and social cohesion.
-  **The Stears initially found it challenging to navigate private-sector networks independently, highlighting the value of trusted intermediary partners.** Corporate partners were more willing to engage once The Stears had demonstrated tangible results through pilot initiatives and partnerships with actors such as UNICEF. Establishing proof of concept was critical for attracting larger-scale corporate investment.
-  **Youth-led approaches were at times viewed by corporate partners as counter to corporate expectations and criteria:** As a youth-led organisation, The Stears sought to maintain meaningful youth participation in programme design and implementation. This sometimes required careful negotiation to ensure that partnership objectives, reporting requirements, and timelines aligned with local realities and youth leadership principles.
-  **The Stears identified that finding private-sector partners whose values aligned with their mission was a significant challenge.** They prioritised partnerships with companies that viewed young people as co-creators rather than beneficiaries and were willing to support long-term social change. However, identifying and cultivating relationships with such partners required considerable time, trust-building and sustained engagement, placing additional demands on an organisation operating with limited resources.
-  **Both The Stears and its partners navigated challenges associated with working in a conflict-affected and politically-sensitive region,** including administrative hurdles, sensitivities around peacebuilding and mental health programming and concerns about how activities would be perceived by communities and institutions.

Key lessons looking ahead

The Stears experience offers a compelling model for how youth-led organisations can navigate constrained funding environments without compromising their values or leadership. Starting with small pilot projects proved more effective than seeking large-scale funding upfront. The organisation was able to attract and retain corporate partners by framing partnerships around shared values, linking peace

education to goals set out in existing Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) priorities, demonstrating community trust for the organisation and taking steps to mitigate risks. Diversifying partnerships across multiple actors also reduced dependency and strengthened organisational flexibility.

For private sector actors, the case highlights that meaningful engagement goes beyond one-off project funding. Multi-year commitments, in-kind support and genuine co-creation with youth-led organisations can generate stronger and more sustainable outcomes than short-term, visibility-driven CSR initiatives. Policymakers, meanwhile, should formally recognise youth-led peacebuilding as a legitimate CSR thematic area and develop intermediary platforms to connect corporates with grassroots organisations in conflict-affected regions.

Acknowledgements

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- ¹ While researchers reached out to both youth-led organisations and private sector partners, private sector actors did not respond to interview requests. Findings therefore reflect the perspectives of youth-led organisations and peacebuilding actors only, which should be noted as a limitation of this study.
- ² Amin S and Khan AW. Life in conflict: Characteristics of Depression in Kashmir. *Int Journal of Health Sciences (Qassim)* 3:2 (2009): 213-23.