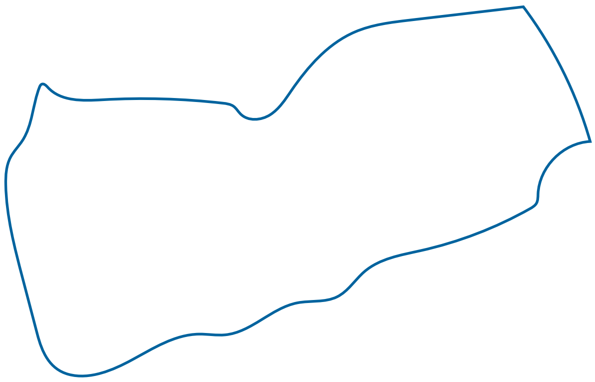
CASE STUDY

Kayan Foundation, Yemen



This case study informs a broader research initiative by Investing and Partnering with Youth for Peace (IPYP), seeking 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 partnerships, locally-grounded approaches, trust-building and moving beyond transactional funding towards genuine co-creation.

This case study is based on interviews conducted in 2025 with the Kayan Foundation.[1]

Context

In Yemen, years of conflict and economic instability have significantly limited opportunities for young people. Following the Yemeni Revolution in 2011 and ongoing civil war, disruptions to education, livelihoods and basic services have contributed to one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises. Over 4.5 million Yemenis are currently internally displaced, the majority being women and children.[2] Some young people choose to engage in armed groups, a decision largely driven by economic desperation and lack of meaningful livelihood opportunities, as nearly three-quarters of the population is estimated to live below the poverty line.[3] Yet Yemeni youth have also emerged as active peacebuilders in response to this crisis. Regionally, the League of Arab States, of which Yemen is a member, adopted and launched in 2025 an Arab Strategy for Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) Action Plan, which explicitly commits to moving youth 'beyond being mere beneficiaries to active contributors in peacebuilding'.[4]

Kayan Foundation and their engagement with the private sector

To address social fragmentation caused by conflict, Maha Awn, a Yemeni youth activist, founded Kayan Foundation as an informal youth-led initiative in 2020 and formally registered it in 2022. The organisation places emphasis on peacebuilding as a long-term, community-based process, in which the private sector was identified as a potential partner in supporting locally-led solutions. Kayan Foundation developed a private sector engagement approach tailored to the context of Yemen, prioritising in-kind contributions, including access to physical spaces, expertise and networks. It also leveraged trusted intermediaries, such as universities and public institutions, to convene stakeholders and strengthen credibility. For example, in Taiz a city in southwestern Yemen, the Taiz Chamber of Commerce and Industry provided training spaces and logistical support for activities to support women facing threats in digital spaces.

Building on this approach, Kayan Foundation participated in a youth empowerment conference hosted by the University of Taiz that brought together private companies, civil society and academia. Through this platform, the organisation facilitated private sector participation and demonstrated the value of collaboration through targeted, event-based partnerships. Kayan Foundation later launched Yemen Innovators, a multi-stakeholder initiative supporting youth-led solutions to local challenges. Through outreach to the financial sector, the organisation secured in-kind and programmatic support from two banks in Taiz.

Exploring approaches to youth-private partnerships

Kayan Foundation approached private sector actors not as funders, but as partners capable of contributing assets, legitimacy and convening power. Rather than seeking direct financial support, the organisation prioritised non-financial contributions such as training space, logistics, and event support, which lowered the entry barrier for businesses while allowing Kayan to deliver programming without taking on financial risk.

Critically, Kayan often approached private-sector actors through intermediaries such as universities, ministries and civil society networks to build trust with the private sector. The already-established credibility among the private sector of these intermediaries was transferred to Kayan and made businesses more receptive to work with Kayan. Each collaboration started out on an activity-basis at first, building incrementally towards deeper partnerships.

In the absence of formal due diligence mechanisms, Kayan developed a network-based vetting process to manage reputational and political risk: informally consulting trusted peers, assessing companies' public standing and avoiding firms linked to armed actors, politically sensitive sectors, or patronage structures. While informal, this approach enabled the organisation to navigate Yemen's highly sensitive operating environment responsibly and reflects a replicable model for youth-led organisations working in fragile contexts.

Kayan Foundation aims to deepen youth-private sector partnerships in Taiz and expand its partnerships approach across Yemen.

Results

Kayan's private sector engagement generated both tangible outputs and broader organisational gains. The partnership with the Taiz Chamber of Commerce and Industry enabled the successful piloting of a digital security training programme for women-led small businesses, delivered at no financial cost to Kayan. The University of Taiz conference, co-convened with private-sector actors, brought together universities, civil society organisations and businesses to showcase dozens of youth-led initiatives, reinforcing Kayan's role as a convening platform within Yemen's peacebuilding ecosystem.

Notably, the Yemen Innovators initiative secured the support of two banking institutions, Al-Tadhamon Bank and Al-Kuraimi Bank, marking a significant milestone for the organisation. Engagement with the formal financial sector reflected the gradual trust built through Kayan's incremental approach to private sector partnership.

More broadly, partnerships with the private sector shifted Kayan's position: from a project implementer seeking resources to a recognised convening platform capable of bringing together diverse actors around shared goals.

Key challenges when engaging the private sector

- As a newly-established youth-led organisation, Kayan Foundation faced barriers in accessing the private sector. Businesses were often hesitant to engage with an informal initiative that lacked institutional visibility and an established track record, and direct outreach efforts frequently went unanswered. Partnerships with more established organisations played an important role in opening doors and facilitating engagement with the private sector, although they also shaped the range of actors and opportunities available to Kayan.
- Barriers to accessing funding made it more difficult for the organisation to implement programming. Kayan Foundation was launched without a reliable funding base, relying on in-kind contributions and volunteer labour. Even once funding became available, disbursement delays created operational challenges: one approved grant of USD 10,000 took over seven months to reach the organisation. Additional barriers included donor preferences for larger, established non-governmental organisations and compliance requirements, such as external audits and formal bookkeeping, which can be difficult for small, early-stage organiswhich posed challenges for Kayan at that stage of its organisational development.
- Conducting due diligence on potential private-sector partners to assess the viability of partnership carried its own risks. In some cases, government authorities scrutinise partnerships with businesses suspected of affiliations with armed groups, meaning that even engaging with or investigating certain companies could expose the organisation to unwanted political attention.

Key lessons looking ahead

Kayan's experience offers several lessons for youth-led organisations seeking to engage the private sector in fragile contexts. Perhaps most fundamentally, intermediaries are not simply a workaround — they can be the strategy. Kayan Foundation found that access to the private sector improved significantly when requests were made through intermediaries — whether personal connections, professional networks or formal institutions. On one occasion, engagement through the Ministry of Youth proved pivotal. By leveraging the credibility of trusted institutions, the organisation was able to build relationships with private sector actors in a way that was both effective and sustainable. Starting with in-kind rather than financial contributions further reduced risk for all parties and created space for trust to develop incrementally.By leveraging trusted institutions as convening bridges, the organisation was able to build relationships with private sector actors in a way that was both effective and sustainable. Starting with in-kind rather than financial contributions further reduced risk for all parties and created space for trust to develop incrementally.

At the same time, Kayan's experience underscores that there is no one-size-fits-all model or way to approach private sector engagement. Replicating or adapting this approach elsewhere in Yemen would require different institutional intermediaries, careful assessment of local private sector readiness, and sensitivity to local political and economic dynamics. Ultimately, the case demonstrates the value of locally-driven approaches that build trust gradually and create shared value for both communities and private-sector partners.

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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 USA for UNHCR. *Yemen Humanitarian Crisis*. (2026).
3 World Bank Group. Economic Strain Deepens in Yemen as Regional Risks Intensify. (2026).
4 UNFPA Arab States. Youth Leading Peace and Security in the Arab Region. (2025).