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# **Toward Transformative Conflict Sensitivity in Youth Work: A Comparative Study from Georgia, Germany, Spain and Ukraine**

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*We aim to advance peace education in Europe by developing and integrating conflict- and trauma-sensitive approaches into youth work.*

*Our project strives to provide youth workers and peacebuilding practitioners with context-specific tools to support young people affected by conflict and displacement.*

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## 1. Introduction

We are living through an era defined by a multidimensional crisis—marked by escalating international and national conflicts, the resurgence of authoritarianism, deepening social polarization, and a worrying erosion of democratic and humanistic values. The compounded effects of global shocks—including the COVID-19 pandemic, accelerating climate collapse, the war in Ukraine, and the ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people—are disproportionately impacting the most vulnerable groups in society. Among them, young people face structural disempowerment, exclusion from political and public life, and increasing difficulty in meeting even their most basic needs.

Against this backdrop, reimagining conflict sensitivity becomes not just necessary, but urgent. Traditional, technocratic models are insufficient in addressing today's entangled crises. What is required is a transformative, intersectional, and emancipatory approach—one that centers the lived experiences, agency, and aspirations of youth, particularly those affected by violence, displacement, and marginalization.

This report emerges from the BREEZE Project, a collaborative research initiative designed to equip youth workers and peacebuilding practitioners with context-sensitive, practical tools to support young people in navigating and transforming conflict. At its core, the project envisions building a dynamic ecosystem that nurtures healing, resilience, and meaningful youth participation in peacebuilding processes.

Based on field research conducted in Georgia, Germany, Spain and Ukraine, this report explores how conflict sensitivity can evolve into a more grounded, transformative framework. Specifically, it aims to:

1. Examine the challenges, needs, and narratives shaping youth engagement in peace, nonviolence, and conflict today;
2. Identify innovative tools, strategies, and practices that promote inclusive and nonviolent transformation;
3. Develop a conceptual and practical framework for Transformative Conflict Sensitivity rooted in participation, justice, and systemic change.

The report is structured in four interrelated sections. The first analyses emerging patterns of conflict and dominant narratives that constrain youth agency. The second maps youth-identified needs, gaps, and future visions across the four case study countries. The third outlines key competencies, effective strategies, and promising tools to strengthen intersectional and participatory peacebuilding practices. The fourth proposes a conceptual framework that integrates the core concepts and approaches identified in the previous sections, with the aim of informing the development of concrete educational programs and practical tools.

In sum, this report offers not only a diagnostic of current challenges but a forward-looking contribution to reimagining conflict sensitivity through the eyes and experiences of youth, a vital step toward building more just, inclusive, and peaceful societies.

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## Methodological framework and other ethical considerations

This study is grounded in a collective, participatory, and phased methodological approach designed to capture the complexity of youth engagement in peacebuilding and conflict transformation across Spain, Ukraine, Georgia and Germany. The research was structured around a gradual process that moved from exploratory inquiry to cross-case synthesis, aiming to co-produce a transformative, conflict-sensitive framework informed by youth perspectives and grounded field realities.

1. The first phase of the research involved comprehensive data collection. This began with a literature review to establish a shared conceptual foundation. It continued with conflict mapping and the identification of youth-specific needs, challenges, and aspirations for the future. Also, national research teams documented peacebuilding strategies, case studies, and tools in use across their communities. In total, 69 youth participants, youth workers, and experts were consulted (see the complete list of respondents in Annex 1). National researchers selected participants based on their profile, geographic origin, gender, and other intersectional aspects. The primary outcome of this phase was the generation of empirical data and thematic patterns, which would later inform the development of the final analytical framework.
2. In the second phase, data were analysed to produce an integrated and context-sensitive model for youth engagement in conflict transformation. This analysis relied on thematic coding and pattern recognition across qualitative inputs from all contexts, while also attending to local specificities.
3. The final phase involved a process of validation and refinement. Draft findings were reviewed by 19 researchers and selected stakeholders through internal peer review and a collaborative workshop on Transformative Conflict-Sensitive Youth Work organized in Barcelona in December 2025 (See list of participants in Annex 2). This iterative process enabled the incorporation of feedback and strengthened the relevance and accuracy of the final results.

Methodologically, the study employed a mix of qualitative techniques, including focus group discussions (FGD), in-depth interviews (IDI), online surveys, and participant observation during events and conferences. Each national team adapted these core methods to reflect the sociopolitical and logistical realities of their context while remaining aligned with the shared analytical framework.

- In Georgia, the methodology combined targeted desk research with original qualitative data from four expert interviews and four FGDs involving 25 participants. These included youth workers and young people from diverse backgrounds, including ethnic minorities, IDPs, and those living in rural or conflict-affected areas near the administrative boundary line (ABL). Semi-structured discussion guides were used to explore how youth understand conflict, how it affects their participation and education, and what strategies are currently in use or desired. The data were anonymized and thematically analysed in line with the study's broader goals.
- In Germany, the research drew primarily from existing literature and secondary data analysis, supplemented by insights from youth work practitioners and policy documents. The analysis focused on understanding the intersections of East-West divisions, migration-related tensions, and intergenerational conflicts affecting German youth. The German case study particularly examined how historical legacies of division continue to shape contemporary youth experiences and how new forms of polarization emerge through digital spaces.

- In Spain, the study focused particularly on Catalonia. Data collection consisted of two FGDs involving 5 participants representing youth workers and educators, alongside 3 expert interviews with experts on the field of peacebuilding and nonviolent action. These respondents provided key insights into the structural causes of violence, youth needs and aspirations, and effective approaches to empowering young people and transforming conflicts within their communities.
- In Ukraine, the study covered 16 regions using a combination of online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. A total of 20 responses were collected via Google Forms, and 16 in-depth interviews were conducted with youth and community members, including internally displaced persons (IDPs). Participants came from a diverse range of regions, such as Volyn, Sumy, Kyiv, Kirovohrad, Kharkiv, Vinnytsia, and Odesa. The focus was on documenting the political, economic, and social challenges facing youth during wartime, as well as their approaches to conflict transformation and resilience.

### Limitations

While field research in Georgia, Spain, and Ukraine involved primary data collection through interviews and focus groups, the German case draws primarily from secondary data and literature analysis. This approach provides comparative European context while acknowledging different research intensities across the four countries. While the study provides rich empirical insights, the findings are analytically—not statistically—generalizable. Key limitations include:

- Rapidly evolving contexts, particularly in Ukraine and Georgia, may affect the durability of certain observations.
- Potential self-censorship, especially in politically sensitive settings such as Georgia, may have influenced the depth of expression among participants.
- Translation limitations may have resulted in minor losses of nuance, particularly in the Georgian material.

## 2. Context: structural causes and actors

Each of the countries studied in this report have their specificities which are a reflection of their historical background, demographic composition and evolution of political systems. However, a common pattern is the impact of the war in Ukraine and the instability in the Mediterranean region, including the migration crisis and the ongoing genocide in Palestine. This aspect shows how globalization exacerbates domestic conflicts but also build global solidarity.

### Georgia

Since independence in 1991, Georgia has faced persistent state-building challenges, exacerbated by unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia’s military presence and recurring “borderisation” incidents have severely affected communities near conflict zones, particularly youth. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine revived wartime fears and reshaped domestic discourse. Authorities invoked “peace” rhetoric to suppress dissent and frame opposition as “pro-war.”

The 2023 mass protests against a proposed “foreign agents” law highlighted growing public resistance to authoritarianism. Although initially withdrawn, a revised version passed in 2024, drawing EU and U.S. condemnation. While EU candidate status was granted in December 2023, hopes faded after the government suspended accession talks in late 2024, prompting unrest.

Meanwhile, Russia's consolidation in occupied regions deepened insecurity and marginalization. Youth in these areas face uncertainty, institutional neglect, and limited opportunities for civic participation, undermining their potential as agents of peace and democratic change.

## **Germany**

Germany faces a complex landscape of intergenerational tensions, socio-economic divisions, and identity fragmentation that particularly impact youth. While not experiencing direct armed conflict, German society grapples with the lingering effects of reunification, migration pressures, and rising political polarization. The East-West divide persists more than three decades after reunification, with eastern regions experiencing higher youth unemployment (11.2% vs 5.4% in western regions), brain drain to western cities, and a stronger presence of far-right movements (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2023).

The migration crisis since 2015 has fundamentally reshaped youth experiences and societal dynamics. Young Germans navigate competing narratives around national identity, with 42% of youth aged 16-25 reporting feeling "caught between cultures" (Shell Jugendstudie, 2019). Second and third-generation migrants face particular challenges, experiencing what participants describe as "perpetual foreignness" despite being born and raised in Germany. Youth workers report that young people from migrant backgrounds must constantly prove their "Germanness" while simultaneously being expected to represent their parents' cultures.

Economic pressures compound these identity tensions. The housing crisis particularly affects young people, with rental costs in major cities like Munich and Berlin consuming up to 50% of young workers' income (Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung, 2023). This economic strain drives youth migration from rural areas and eastern states, creating "opportunity deserts" similar to those observed in Georgia and Ukraine. Youth describe feeling trapped between the expectation of academic achievement and the reality of precarious employment, with 38% of university graduates working in temporary contracts (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023).

Digital polarization has emerged as a critical concern, with algorithm-driven radicalization occurring across political spectrums. Youth workers report that platforms like TikTok and Telegram have become breeding grounds for extremist content, with far-right groups particularly adept at targeting disaffected young men through gaming communities and fitness influencer networks. The youth wing of the political party Alternative für Deutschland has grown by 35% since 2020, capitalising on economic anxieties and identity-related insecurities. (Verfassungsschutz, 2023).

## **Spain/Catalonia**

Though distant from armed conflict, Spain is increasingly affected by hybrid warfare, especially through misinformation fuelling far-right movements. In Catalonia, these groups exploit public concerns—migration, housing, unemployment, LGBTQ+ rights—to polarize society and promote violence. The resulting fear undermines democratic dialogue and youth engagement. (Turgas i Vilardell, 2025)

Since 2015, migration pressures have led to the militarization of borders. The COVID-19 pandemic further normalized surveillance, later used to suppress youth activism and protest. Civic space has narrowed, with increased criminalization of dissent.

Nevertheless, youth remain politically active. The Gaza conflict has galvanized pro-Palestinian mobilizations across grassroots, student, and non-activist groups. These movements reflect broader demands for global justice and human rights. However, sustained engagement faces obstacles from policing and digital repression. Supporting youth as democratic actors requires safeguarding civic freedoms, dismantling systemic barriers, and fostering inclusive public discourse in an increasingly securitized European context

## Ukraine

Ukrainian youth face compounded pressures: the trauma of war and entrenched structural challenges that hinder their development. Corruption and nepotism remain pervasive, with many young people believing that “connections, not competence,” determine success—particularly in public and civic sectors. This perception discourages engagement and reinforces inequality, especially among regional youth without access to informal networks.

Territorial inequality further limits opportunity. Youth in rural areas face restricted access to education, cultural spaces, and mobility programs, prompting migration to cities and diminishing small communities’ development potential.

Moreover, distrust of institutions remains a recurring theme. Authorities are viewed as opaque, unresponsive, and self-serving, discouraging political and civic engagement. Symbolic youth participation compounds this problem. Young people are often invited into decision-making spaces without genuine influence, leading to disillusionment and withdrawal.

Despite these barriers, many youth pursue independent initiatives, driving humanitarian aid and community resilience. However, long-term peacebuilding demands inclusive systems that recognize and amplify youth agency.

## 2.1 Emerging conflicts and challenges affecting youth

### War and danger

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally altered the political, economic, and psychosocial landscape in Europe, with devastating consequences for young people. In Ukraine, the war has created a climate of constant danger: systematic shelling, mobilization restrictions, and the omnipresence of air raid sirens have profoundly affected youth mental health, daily life, and long-term planning. Youth interviewed described heightened isolation, demotivation, and psychological stress, with one young person noting the difficulty of planning life under constant threat.

In Georgia, the conflict with Russia remains a dominant force in public life and youth identity. In discussions about conflicts and their resolution or transformation, the “Russian factor” often overshadows and absorbs the ethnic dimension of these conflicts. For many internally displaced and conflict-affected youth—especially from Abkhazia and the Gali municipality—the occupation continues to shape their experiences. As one participant emphasized, “Everything in our debates connects back to the conflict with Russia—the occupation is the main issue” (FGD 3 – rural youth/IDPs, Georgia). Civic space is increasingly constrained; political actors instrumentalize the notion of “peace” to delegitimize dissent, and youth activists feel restricted in their ability to publicly criticize the government without being labelled as destabilizing actors.

In Spain, the war in Ukraine has impacted youth more indirectly. Youth workers and activists interpret the militarization of European societies as rooted in colonial and patriarchal logics, raising concerns about the normalization of force in policymaking (FGD 1 –youth workers, Spain). Additionally, participants across social movements identified a perceived double standard in the European Union’s response—empathizing with Ukrainian victims of war while failing to address the genocide in Gaza. This has deepened disillusionment and a sense of marginalization, particularly among politically engaged youth and racialized communities.

In Germany, the war in Ukraine has triggered complex responses shaped by historical memory and contemporary divisions. Youth in eastern Germany, express more ambivalent views toward Western support, with 31% of youth aged 18-25 opposing weapons deliveries to Ukraine compared to 19% in western regions (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 2023). This divide reflects deeper East-West tensions, where eastern youth report feeling their perspectives are dismissed as “Putin-Versteher” (Putin understanders) rather than legitimate political positions. On the other side of the political spectrum and in many migrant communities, the lack of action against Israel’s genocide in Gaza and the criminalisation of pro-Palestinian protests and police violence are causing deep frustration.

Across all four contexts, youth are navigating environments increasingly shaped by war discourse, securitization, and shrinking civic space. Their sense of agency is diminished by the normalization of fear and violence, but many continue to seek nonviolent, participatory avenues for resistance and dialogue.

### **Economic constraints**

Economic instability and structural inequality emerged as central barriers to youth participation and wellbeing in Georgia, Germany, Spain and Ukraine. While differing in intensity and form, the consequences are consistent: rising unemployment, weakened public services, youth migration, and declining community cohesion.

In Ukraine, economic hardship is especially severe in rural areas and small towns, where employment opportunities are scarce and informal labour conditions prevail. Many young people are forced to leave their home communities in search of work, contributing to brain drain and social fragmentation. “There are fewer jobs, low wages, and nothing to stay for” shared one participant. The mismatch between education and labour markets, coupled with housing insecurity and weak psychosocial support, contributes to demotivation, alienation, and vulnerability to radicalization or manipulation. As one young informant explained, “Migration is less an adventure than an escape.” In regions like Kirovohrad, youth are often excluded from decision-making: “We offer ideas, and we would like to see them put into practice” (IDI 11 – youth worker Ukraine), yet many report their proposals are ignored by authorities, reinforcing apathy and disengagement.

A similar dynamic was observed in Georgia, particularly outside the capital, where “opportunity deserts” prevail. For instance, youth in areas like Pankisi experience structural neglect—limited mentorship, poor infrastructure, and few civic initiatives. Without assets, land ownership, or political influence, their voices are systematically marginalized. “NGO capacity is thinning, and youth are organizing with fewer peers,” noted an expert (IDI 1 – youth expert, Georgia). Economic challenges are compounded by unequal resource distribution and the absence of youth-friendly infrastructure.

In Spain, particularly in Catalonia’s marginalized urban neighbourhoods, economic precarity intersects with social fragmentation. Youth face unstable family environments, limited access to quality education, and exposure to violence—both domestic and systemic. According to youth workers, students in secondary education express a desire to leave school in order to reclaim control over their lives and time (FGD 2 – youth workers, Spain). This reflects a broader aspiration for autonomy in the face of persistent structural disempowerment. Social media influencers, disconnected from real-life conditions, often become aspirational figures, reinforcing capitalist and binary norms. “Behind this, there is a mechanism of socialization that defends to the hilt capitalist, family-centred, and binary visions and models,” observed a key expert on anti-discrimination (IDI 3 – Youth expert, Spain).

In Germany, economic precarity intersects with regional disparities and generational tensions. The “Generation Praktikum” (internship generation) phenomenon persists, with young Germans cycling through unpaid or poorly paid internships for years before securing stable employment. Housing affordability has reached crisis levels, which makes it extremely hard to find available and affordable housing for youth who lacks substantial financial resources. In eastern regions, youth unemployment fuels resentment. Many young people here experience double marginalization—economically excluded within Germany and politically dismissed when expressing frustration. In urban centers, many youth work as freelancers without benefits or security, particularly in creative and digital sectors (Hans-Böckler-Stiftung, 2023). A common experience for many in these groups is a high degree of economic insecurity and concerns about the future, which make them vulnerable to populist rhetoric.

Across all contexts, economic exclusion is a major driver of youth disengagement, mobility, and distrust. It creates localized ecosystems of scarcity that weaken civil society, increase vulnerability to polarization, and diminish the potential for meaningful youth participation in democratic life.

### **Polarization and social barriers**

The research revealed strong patterns of social polarization and identity-based marginalization in all four countries, with youth from displaced, racialized, or minority backgrounds facing systemic barriers to inclusion.

In Georgia and Ukraine, IDPs and ethnic minority youth continue to experience structural discrimination in access to housing, education, cultural participation, and sports facilities. In Ukraine this type of discrimination occurs in urban and rural areas. Participants in Georgia reported that young people from ethnic minorities “have to work twice as hard to prove their competence,” highlighting the intersection of ethnic exclusion and limited opportunity (FGD 4 – youth ethnic/religious minorities, Georgia). Stereotypes, language barriers, and historical grievances contribute to persistent stigmatization. In regions such as Gori, Muslims face discrimination from far-right groups. (Research Workshop, Barcelona, December 2025)

In Germany, polarization manifests through overlapping divides: East-West, native-migrant, and urban-rural. Youth with migration backgrounds report experiencing everyday and structural racism in schools, job markets, public spaces and through the police. The concept of integration itself has become contested, with young Germans of migrant descent rejecting the expectation to constantly prove their belonging. Eastern German youth describe feeling stereotyped as either “backwards” or “radical,” while simultaneously expressing resentment toward migrants whom they perceive as receiving preferential treatment. This creates competition for recognition

between marginalized groups (Heitmeyer, 2022). The rise of identitarian movements has particularly targeted young men through “metapolitical” strategies—using cultural activities, music, and sports to normalize far-right ideologies before explicit political recruitment.

In Spain, youth experts identified an alarming normalization of violence against marginalized groups, driven largely by digital platforms. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, social media has become a dominant space for youth socialization, where fear and violence are legitimized through viral content, fake news, and targeted disinformation. This violence often spills into offline life, taking the form of online and physical attacks against women, racialized individuals, LGBTQ+ youth, and migrants. “There is a dissemination of flyers against migrant youth and hosting centers,” one expert explained (IDI 3 – youth expert, Spain) These platforms are also “storefronts of happiness,” where constant exposure to idealized lifestyles exerts emotional pressure, particularly around aesthetics and self-worth (IDI 1 – youth expert, Spain). This frustration is strategically exploited by ultra-conservative movements that “capture rage” through fear-based messaging and scapegoating (IDI 3 – youth expert, Spain).

Social polarization, whether along ethnic, territorial, or ideological lines, has been exacerbated by distrust in institutions and the perceived absence of inclusive narratives. Without deliberate investment in intergroup dialogue and civic education, these divides risk becoming entrenched, threatening social cohesion and youth resilience.

### **Public services and spaces**

Public services—especially education, housing, and access to civic spaces—emerged as both symptomatic of broader structural inequality and central to youth demands across all four countries. In Georgia, youth highlighted authoritarian educational practices, including humiliation in the classroom, weak student voice, and a lack of school psychologists and social workers. Infrastructural issues such as inadequate sanitation deepen the perception of neglect. In conflict-affected areas, educational and mobility restrictions contribute to identity fragmentation and alienation. Gender disparities also persist; when resources are scarce, boys are prioritized, and gendered stereotypes continue to influence educational and career pathways.

In Spain, public housing is a critical concern. In cities like Barcelona, youth are being priced out due to mass tourism, speculative investment, and insufficient housing policy. The privatization of public space has led to new forms of youth-led resistance. In some neighbourhoods, activists occupy and reorganize public areas to reclaim them as community venues for cultural and political expression. These “spaces of struggle” become essential arenas for nonviolent activism, youth leadership, and community solidarity.

In Ukraine, particularly in areas affected by conflict or institutional collapse, public services are overstretched or inaccessible. The absence of tailored youth services, safe community spaces, and participatory mechanisms has created a vacuum, often filled by informal or grassroots initiatives. However, these are rarely integrated into formal governance structures, limiting their long-term impact. The constant Russian attacks on critical infrastructure affect energy supply, transportation, and communication systems, with direct impacts on the daily lives, health, and work of the Ukrainian population.

In Germany, the education system’s tracked structure (educational tracks: Hauptschule, Realschule, Gymnasium) perpetuates social stratification from age 10, with migrant youth and

youth from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds disproportionately channelled into lower tracks. Schools as sites of selection rather than education is a particular prominent factor in Germany, where socioeconomic background predicts outcomes more than ability. Youth centers face chronic underfunding and closure, particularly in rural and eastern areas. Participants report that remaining youth spaces often feel disconnected from their actual needs and interests, designed more for containment than empowerment (Deutsches Jugendinstitut, 2023).

Overall, the availability, quality, and inclusiveness of public services significantly affect young people’s sense of belonging, agency, and possibility. Across all four countries, the revitalization of public infrastructure—physical and institutional—is essential for youth empowerment, resilience, and peacebuilding.

## 2.2 Dominant narratives

Across the research contexts, a recurring theme emerged: dominant public and institutional narratives frequently seek to disempower youth, suppress agency, and delegitimize their participation in political and civic life. These narratives portray young people as inexperienced, apolitical, or not yet “ready,” contributing to disaffection and withdrawal from formal spaces of influence.

Despite often carrying adult responsibilities—such as caregiving, household duties, or income generation—young people are still dismissed as immature or politically naïve. In Georgia, participants described a culture of adultcentrism where youth voices are routinely ignored or patronized: “Youth lack experience” was a commonly cited refrain. As one participant expressed, “Despite all we do, we are not regarded as a person who is already an adult and has their own opinion—we are told to ‘wait your turn’” (FGD 3 – rural youth/IDPs, Georgia). This reflects intergenerational friction, where decision-making remains the domain of elders, and young people are excluded from local governance, family dialogue, and even classroom interactions.

The psychological impacts of such exclusion are profound. Feelings of invisibility, powerlessness, and distrust of older generations undermine young people’s motivation to participate in public life. A Ukrainian participant described this frustration poignantly: “We can organize a festival, but we cannot influence the council’s decisions” (IDI 13 – youth expert, Ukraine). There is a growing gap between youth activity and influence—young people are willing to act, but struggle to see tangible outcomes from their engagement.

In response to this marginalization, many youth are turning to alternative spaces—informal groups, volunteer initiatives, and online activism—to express themselves, organize, and take action. In Georgia and Ukraine, successful local initiatives have shown the potential to transform disempowering narratives, allowing young people to realize their capacity for leadership and collective impact.

Yet these same alternative spaces are not free from challenges. Across all four contexts, the digital environment has become a key battleground for youth identity and political socialization. While it offers platforms for mobilization, it also exposes youth to harmful ideologies, manipulation, and polarization. In Spain, youth workers noted a sharp rise in far-right discourse targeting adolescents (particularly those aged 15–18), spread through influencers and viral media. A dominant narrative

disseminated through these channels is that “feminism is the reason men no longer have affective relationships” and that “women want to take away men’s privileges.” Hate speech against migrants is also acute, and alarmingly, even marginalized youth are internalizing these narratives. One expert observed that “emotion and indignation drive youth identity and action—far-right groups capture these feelings and organize people from the rage” (IDI 3 – youth expert, Spain). Similar dynamics are visible in Georgia, where experts reported that online spaces often amplify polarization and labelling. While some youth moderators attempt to maintain civility, they frequently lack the tools, support, or training to combat online hate or misinformation.

In Germany, dominant narratives around youth oscillate between moral panic and paternalistic concern. Media discourse frequently portrays eastern German youth as inherently susceptible to extremism, while youth with migration backgrounds are simultaneously expected to be model minorities and viewed with suspicion as potential parallel society members. The concept of “Leitkultur” (leading culture) is weaponized to demand assimilation while denying full acceptance. Youth report experiencing democracy fatigue, feeling that their participation is welcomed only when it aligns with established positions. Meanwhile, climate activists face infantilization as unrealistic idealists while simultaneously being criminalized for civil disobedience, reflecting broader contradictions in how youth agency is perceived (Institut für Protest- und Bewegungsforschung, 2023).

At the international level, youth activists expressed growing disillusionment with perceived double standards in global governance and foreign policy. The uneven international responses to the war in Ukraine and the genocide in Gaza were widely criticized. Participants across countries noted that these inconsistencies undermine trust in international law and complicate efforts to build unified global youth platforms. Tensions were particularly evident in international and European networks, where members struggled to develop joint statements condemning both Russia and Israel for war crimes, highlighting fractures in transnational solidarity.

Finally, these dominant narratives are combined with systematic strategies of propaganda and disinformation. In Ukraine, information warfare attempts to erase Ukrainian identity, including language and historical facts. This has huge impact on collective consciousness while contributing to polarization in Ukraine and diaspora communities- Russian propaganda is also widespread in Western Europe, exacerbating the lack of understanding of the dynamics and challenges in Eastern Europe. In Georgia, Russian propaganda promotes the use of Russian language and values affecting also national consciousness. (Research Workshop, Barcelona, December 2025)

### 3. Youth needs, gaps and visions

Building on the structural challenges outlined in Chapter 2, this chapter synthesizes the urgent needs and systemic gaps identified across Georgia, Germany, Spain, and Ukraine. These needs emerge from two interconnected sources: the adverse conditions youth experience—war, political instability, economic inequality, exclusionary narratives—and their determination to transform these realities through participation, learning, and collective action.

The chapter organizes these needs into six thematic domains: stability and security, quality education and critical competencies, youth participation and civic space, psychological safety and wellbeing, mentorship and social support, and frameworks for peace and security. Across all contexts, young people articulate a profound critique: traditional approaches of addressing

conflict, education, and civic engagement are inadequate for contemporary challenges. What emerges is not simply a list of deficits, but a vision for new tools, paradigms, and systems that recognize youth as agents of change rather than passive recipients of intervention.

### 3.1 Needs and gaps

Building on the structural challenges outlined in previous sections, this chapter synthesizes the urgent needs and systemic gaps identified across Georgia, Germany, Spain and Ukraine. These needs arise both from the adverse conditions experienced by youth—including war, political instability, economic inequality, and exclusionary narratives—and from their desire to engage in transforming their societies through participation, learning, and solidarity. The needs are grouped thematically into six key domains: stability and security, quality education, youth participation, psychological safety, mentorship, and reference frameworks. Overall, young people are calling for new tools and paradigms, because “old ways” are perceived as ineffective or inadequate in responding to emerging challenges. (Research Workshop, Barcelona, December 2025).

#### Stability and Security: Pathways to Certainty

In Ukraine, youth emphasized a fundamental need for predictability and security to be able to plan life decisions such as education, employment, and relocation. Constant exposure to insecurity, war, and forced mobility deprives young people of the basic conditions necessary for self-determination. In this regard, national identity is central to understanding the Ukrainian struggle and resistance to Russia. Any engagement with youth in Ukraine should fully take these aspects into account. Also, basic needs, include access to water and energy services.

A similar concern is echoed in Georgia, especially in rural areas and conflict-affected regions. Youth face unmet basic livelihood needs—affordable housing, transportation access, and entry-level employment opportunities. One rural participant noted: “I need something to start with—no house, no savings; sometimes not even the bus fare” (FGD 3 – rural youth/IDPs, Georgia). Youth and experts in Georgia criticized the absence of structured, long-term livelihood pathways. As one expert stated: “There are no livelihoods programmes—we stop at raising awareness” (IDI 2 – youth expert, Georgia). In both contexts, the lack of a continuum from training to employment undermines long-term social inclusion.

Social networks are a key source of insecurity. Young people are exposed to hate speech, cyberbullying, and sexual violence. There is a need to develop both offline and online spaces to protect and empower youth against these threats. Such empowerment should include awareness and capacity to think and act from an intersectional perspective, in order to understand multiple forms of oppression and the differentiated gendered impacts of violence. (Research workshop, Barcelona, December 2025)

#### Quality Education and Critical Competencies

Across all four countries, youth and experts identified gaps in education quality, relevance, and inclusiveness. In all four countries analysed, a key need is to develop education systems able to respond to critical challenges such as gender-based violence.

In Ukraine, alongside the need for job creation, young people expressed a strong demand for spaces

for learning, self-development, and entrepreneurship. A youth worker from Volyn put it: “We need not only jobs, but also places where we can learn and develop.” (IDI 1 – youth worker, Ukraine)

In Georgia, the education system faces multiple structural gaps—including outdated pedagogical practices, poor resources, and a lack of support for inquiry-based learning. As one expert noted: “No one teaches inquiry—everything is left to self-development.” Moreover, civic literacy and peace skills such as conflict analysis, nonviolent communication, fact-checking, and group facilitation are rarely taught. “If you try to resolve a conflict peacefully, they think you’re weak.” (FGD 1 – youth workers, Georgia). To combat favouritism and clientelism, youth in Georgia called for merit-based systems with visible recognition such as credits or digital badges. Intergroup mixing was also identified as a strategy for inclusion: “The vulnerable keep boiling in their own pot—no one builds bridges.” (FGD 2 – youth workers, Georgia)

In Spain, youth workers highlighted that influencers now function as informal educators. However, many promote misinformation and conservative ideologies. Youth tend to absorb this content without questioning its origin. This points to the urgent need for critical thinking curricula in both formal and non-formal education, especially in the context of rising hate speech. As one practitioner noted, discriminatory attitudes often arise “because they have basic needs that are not covered.” (FGD 3 – youth workers, Spain)

In Germany, the education system perpetuates rather than mitigates social inequality and fails to address contemporary challenges like digital extremism, social division or the climate crisis. Critical thinking about German history remains limited to Holocaust education, while colonial history, guest worker exploitation, and ongoing structural racism receive minimal attention. In general, the education system struggles with contemporary and critical methods that recognize diverse knowledge systems (Rat für Migration, 2023).

## Youth Participation and Civic Space

Youth in all targeted countries expressed both aspirations and frustrations regarding civic and political participation.

In Georgia, the current wave of youth-led protests reflects a willingness for political engagement—but also reveals deep mistrust and fear of politicization and labelling. “As soon as you start organising, they stick a label on you,” said one participant (FGD 1 – youth workers, Georgia). Young people worry that activism will lead to accusations of being aligned with opposition parties or manipulated by external forces: “As if nobody believes we have our own opinion.” (FGD 1 – youth workers, Georgia). Experts noted that self-censorship and withdrawal are common responses to this climate. Classrooms remain authoritarian, youth spaces are scarce, and public debate is often exclusionary. “Fine, suppose I learn—but they still won’t listen,” summarized one youth expert (IDI 4 – youth expert, Georgia), capturing the disconnect between knowledge and influence. This environment is especially hostile for girls, IDPs, and linguistic minorities, who must work “twice as hard” to be taken seriously. Many young people view migration as a rational response to stagnation, inequality, and limited civic space.

In Spain, youth are overwhelmed by work, studies, and responsibilities, leaving little time or energy for civic engagement. Youth workers stressed the need to understand emerging forms of youth organization, which often diverge from traditional associations and use new digital codes. While technology offers powerful tools, maintaining offline spaces is essential for promoting physical interaction and collective identity-building. Furthermore, linking global issues with daily

realities was seen as a key engagement strategy. One practitioner noted: “We need to show how Trump’s hate speech relates to bullying in class.” (FGD 3 – youth workers, Spain). Youth also need opportunities to propose concrete focus areas, making activism more relevant and actionable.

In Germany, youth participation is structured through formal channels—youth parliaments, youth councils, and student representations—yet often offering symbolic rather than substantive influence. Real decision-making power remains with an increasingly aging adult population, who does not focus on intergenerational justice. Meanwhile, youth-led movements like Fridays for Future face a paradox: celebrated internationally while being dismissed domestically. The criminalization of climate activists as climate terrorists reveals deep contradictions in German democracy’s relationship with youth dissent. Youth with migration backgrounds report that their civic engagement is viewed with suspicion, particularly Muslim youth whose political participation is often framed through security rather than democratic lenses (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2023).

### **Psychological Safety, Wellbeing and Everyday Support**

Young people across Georgia, Germany, Spain and Ukraine identified significant mental health challenges, exacerbated by war, insecurity, and systemic exclusion. The general approach should combine collective support with the individualization of psychological wellbeing. Sources of insecurity originate in both offline and online spaces and have direct impacts on psychological and physical well-being, including nutrition and the consumption of processed food.

In Ukraine, the psychosocial toll of war is profound—stress, anxiety, and burnout are widespread, while access to psychological support is limited. “We don’t have a psychologist at our youth center, and there’s no one to talk to,” (IDI 3 – youth worker, Ukraine).

In Georgia, the lack of school psychologists and trauma-informed educators perpetuates alienation. “We need psychologists in every school—people who actually know how to work on behavioural issues,” stated a youth worker (FGD 3 – youth worker, Georgia). A teacher confirmed: “In public schools, there is sometimes humiliation—this kills motivation.” (FGD 3 – youth worker, Georgia).

In Germany, mental health support remains stigmatized and inaccessible, with waiting times for therapy averaging 6-9 months. The inherent performance pressure within the school system paired with high levels of youth unemployment, recently also for university graduates, leads to significant levels of anxiety, burnout, and depression. School psychologists, where they exist, are overwhelmed and undertrained in addressing contemporary challenges like social media addiction or identity-based harassment. Youth with migration backgrounds face additional barriers, including therapists’ cultural incompetence and tendency to pathologize normal responses to discrimination (Bundespsychotherapeutenkammer, 2023).

In all countries, safe, youth-owned spaces are rare—especially those that allow for disagreement and expression without punishment or politicization. These environments are essential not just for healing, but for learning, organizing, and building trust.

### **Mentorship, Coaching, and Support Structures**

In Ukraine, participants emphasized the need for mentors and intergenerational allies to help navigate challenges in education, employment, and civic life. This support is especially crucial for remote and displaced youth, who face additional barriers. Mentors not only offer guidance but

also foster social capital and motivation.

Successful examples included micro-grants for youth-led ideas, paired with coaching and institutional co-funding. Activities such as dialogue circles, storytelling labs, and small service projects were viewed as highly effective. “Camps and small projects are the most real—you come away with friends, not just ideas.” (FGD 3 – rural youth/IDPs, Georgia)

In Spain, the absence of positive role models is linked to the rise of hate speech among youth. Youth workers called for investment in community-rooted reference figures who can embody inclusive values and amplify youth voices. An expert noted “When movements are able to speak for themselves, it becomes easier to push for policy changes at the local level” (IDI 3 - youth expert, Spain)

In Germany, mentorship programs reveal stark disparities between rhetoric and reality. While initiatives like “Bildungspaten” (education mentors) exist, they sometimes reinforce rather than challenge systemic inequalities, with mentors primarily helping youth navigate discriminatory systems rather than questioning them. Successful counterexamples include peer-to-peer mentorship programs where slightly older youth share similar backgrounds, creating possibility models—showing that alternative futures exist.

Additionally, youth workers need to be aware of key potential risks when engaging with young people affected by conflict. Participants in the Transformative Conflict-Sensitivity Workshop identified demotivation, lack of accurate information and reliable sources, and potential stigmatization as key risks. Youth workers should be prepared to promote critical thinking, address personal and collective emotions, and create channels for advocacy and social transformation. (Research Workshop, Barcelona, December 2025)

## 3.2 Visions about the future

Conflict transformation requires a long-term vision beyond the immediate crisis; for this reason, imagining “what does not yet exist” becomes a political and ethical act essential to peace. Scholar-practitioner John Paul Lederach conceptualizes this as the horizon of tomorrow—a process through which structural, cultural, relational, and personal changes are re-envisioned and progressively constructed to build sustainable peace (2005).

### Stability and Dignity

Stability in countries affected by conflict or crisis implies a transformative approach. The aim is not only to adapt to or build resilience against these challenges, but to fundamentally transform the values that drive societies. For example, dignity is understood as not having to constantly defend, fight for, or justify one’s existence. Solidarity, in turn, implies developing societal infrastructures capable of identifying, preventing, and mitigating policies that negatively affect vulnerable groups. (Research Workshop, Barcelona, December 2025).

In Ukraine and Georgia, transparency, equity, and democracy are central to young people’s vision of a better future. A young person from Kyiv emphasized: “I want us to live in a country where there is justice and opportunities for everyone” (IDI 4 – youth, Ukraine). Others underlined the importance of inclusive and transparent decision-making, where influence is not limited to

those with connections: “We would like decisions to be made more transparently and to take into account the opinions of everyone, not just those with connections” (IDI 14 – youth expert, Ukraine).

These values point to a broader desire for systemic transformation in public administration, as well as for youth involvement in monitoring and civic oversight—key drivers of trust in institutions and active citizenship.

In Georgia, youth envision a stable and fair society where rules are consistent, education leads to meaningful employment, and basic services such as healthcare are accessible and non-catastrophic. The presence of trusted teachers, functioning student councils, or small local grants can create tangible wins and restore motivation. In the absence of such stability, migration is widely seen as a rational alternative.

### **Peace and Security**

In Ukraine, young people’s foremost aspiration is to end the war and establish guaranteed personal and collective security. This is not only about survival, but about regaining the ability to plan one’s life, education, and career without the fear of harm to oneself or loved ones. Belief in a peaceful future motivates youth to volunteer, participate in civic projects, and explore constructive forms of engagement in local governance. This sense of security is viewed as essential for enabling youth to achieve their potential and influence community development in meaningful ways.

In Georgia, the notion of peace is complicated by political manipulation and the legacy of unresolved territorial conflicts. Youth express a need for spaces where peace is not politicized and where they can contribute to building safe, inclusive communities without fear of stigmatization or surveillance.

Moreover, across all targeted countries, the politics of remembrance and collective memory were identified as key approaches for future transformation. A Georgian respondent noted: “There is a need to talk about occupation, to help younger generations understand that life has not always been like this, to make them part of our struggle, and to explain what really happened and how things were before the occupation”. (Research Workshop Barcelona, 2025).

### **Opportunities and Self-Realization**

Fairness is a key principle to ensure equal treatment to all sectors in society, with special attention to national minorities, IDPs and other vulnerable groups. Youth from ethnic minority backgrounds often face intersecting challenges that limit their ability to plan or shape their own futures. These include family-imposed obligations, such as marriage and domestic responsibilities, which constrain autonomy and delay or derail educational or professional trajectories

Youth workers also emphasized that the pressures of economic precarity, social inequality, and exclusion from traditional civic spaces make it difficult for youth to fully engage with existing opportunity structures. These insights reinforce the need for targeted support, inclusive programming, and a deeper understanding of the cultural and emotional dimensions that shape youth decision-making and participation. In this regard, safe spaces are essential for addressing key societal issues that are often invisible or overlooked by the general public. This is particularly relevant in Ukraine and Georgia, where there are noteworthy initiatives, such as the Art House in Gori. (Research Workshop Barcelona, 2025).

In Spain, youth workers reported that many young people aspire to self-development through

work, education, and social engagement. However, these opportunities are not equally accessible to all. The access to public housing and other basic services is commonly cited by Spanish and other youth responders (FGD 1 – youth workers, Spain).

In Germany, youth visions for the future reveal deep ambivalence. Eastern German and rural youth particularly struggle to envision positive futures in their home regions, which drives continued outmigration. Youth with migration backgrounds articulate visions of a post-integration Germany where diversity is normalized rather than problematized (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2023). Climate-conscious youth envision radical systemic transformation but express frustration that their futures are being stolen by older generations' inaction. Across divides, young Germans share an unaddressed desire for intergenerational justice—a society that does not mortgage their futures for present comfort.

## 4. Peacebuilding understanding, strategies and tools

Having identified youth needs (Chapter 3) and the structural challenges they navigate (Chapter 2), this chapter turns to how youth understand peace and what strategies support their engagement in building it. It addresses three questions: How do young people across these contexts conceptualize peace? What values and competencies enable constructive engagement with conflict? What strategies have proven effective in supporting youth as peacebuilders? The chapter operates from a fundamental premise: youth are already engaged in peacebuilding, often without institutional recognition or support. The frameworks and strategies presented here thus aim to strengthen existing practice rather than impose external models, recognizing youth as producers of peace rather than merely recipients of peace education.

### 4.1 Understandings of peace and other key concepts

Youth across Georgia, Germany, Spain and Ukraine express complex, evolving understandings of peace that go far beyond the mere absence of armed conflict. Across contexts, young people highlight the need for everyday peace, justice, nonviolence, and cultural inclusion—while also grappling with politicized narratives, symbolic exclusion, and unaddressed historical grievances. Despite considerable contextual differences, common challenges emerge, including instrumentalized discourses, depoliticized peace education, and the persistent absence of systemic transformation.

#### Georgia: Politicized Peace and Emotional Complexity

Since 2022, the term “peace” in Georgia has become politicized and weaponized, often used by government actors to silence dissent and discredit opposition. This has led to a climate of self-censorship, where many young people avoid public initiatives for fear of being labelled or targeted. As a response, youth tend to prefer low-visibility, people-to-people cooperation—such as dialogue camps, youth exchanges, and collaborative projects in heritage, environment, or school life. These formats are seen as practical and less susceptible to politicization.

Young people also advocate for school-based reforms that embed everyday peace practices, such as listening, fact-checking, respectful debate, and nonviolent communication. These were repeatedly named as missing yet essential skills. Conflict literacy is perceived as a necessary

component of both formal education and civic development, while intergenerational memory work and storytelling are valued as tools to reduce emotional intensity without forcing consensus.

A widespread misconception persists equating the absence of war with peace. “People think that if bombs aren’t falling, that’s peace.” (FGD 3 – rural youth/IDPs, Georgia) This underscores the gap between physical security and social peace, where everyday injustices, disrespect, and fear remain unaddressed.

The Abkhazian-Georgian conflict continues to generate competing narratives, especially among youth. While some participants called for acknowledging past mistakes and offering apologies to Abkhazians and South Ossetians, others were “categorically against it” (FGD 3 – rural youth/IDPs, Georgia). This unresolved tension between justice claims and status politics sustains an emotionally charged, politically sensitive environment. IDP youth reported facing stigma and additional burdens, often hiding their status to avoid being perceived as a “weight” (FGD 3 – rural youth/IDPs, Georgia). Gali and ABL youth were described as living in a liminal space—“neither Abkhaz nor Georgian”—facing language restrictions in school and ongoing uncertainty (FGD 2– Youth worker, Georgia).

### **Spain: Critique of Passive Peace and the Need for Emancipatory Narratives**

In Spain, young people acknowledge the existence of peace—but often describe it as a “passive” peace that lacks depth, transformation, and justice. The dominant understanding of peace is sometimes associated with neutrality, depoliticization, or inaction, which many youth and social movement actors reject.

There is significant work in peace education at the school level, particularly in areas like mediation, interpersonal conflict resolution, and nonviolent communication. However, experts pointed out that such approaches tend to depoliticize peace, stripping it of its connection to social emancipation. Instead, values such as justice, freedom, and resistance resonate more strongly in the imaginaries of youth engaged in activism and community organizing.

Nonviolence remains a central area of work, but youth workers emphasized the need to link it with concrete, local practices—such as environmental justice or feminist organizing. The key challenge is integrating peace and nonviolence with broader structural critiques, including of climate injustice, gender inequality, colonial legacies, and capitalist extractivism.

Furthermore, several experts noted a lack of awareness around the civilizational crisis and the structural roots of violence embedded in dominant paradigms. Current peace and nonviolence interventions often fall short in promoting collective, strategic action to transform these deeper causes of conflict.

### **Ukraine: Peace Victory, Safety and Inclusion**

In Ukraine, the concept of “peace” is deeply sensitive and contested. Because of the ongoing war, peace is often interpreted as implying dialogue or normalization with Russia, and thus risks being perceived as socially taboo. Amid negotiations around ceasefires or peace agreements at the international level, new terms have emerged—most notably the notion of “victory peace”, which seeks to balance justice and sovereignty with a desire for safety and closure.

At the civil society level, many Ukrainian youth and organizations prioritize the creation of safe

spaces and psychosocial support, especially for IDPs, LGBTQ+ individuals, national minorities, and persons with disabilities. These efforts reflect a bottom-up commitment to tolerance and empathy, where respect becomes the foundation for a more inclusive peace culture.

Cultural sensitivity is expressed through the use of local traditions, artistic practices, and folk customs in peacebuilding initiatives. One participant from Sumy shared: “When we organized an evening of songs and traditional dishes, people saw that we respected their culture, and then it was easier to start talking about other important issues.” (IDI 3 – youth worker, Ukraine) Such initiatives help build trust, create shared meaning, and turn culture into a tool for reconciliation.

Despite significant progress in youth and women’s leadership in NGOs, businesses, and local communities, gender inequality persists. Young women activists continue to face stereotypes, exclusion, and unequal treatment in public and political life. These dynamics not only devalue their contributions but also limit their participation in community decision-making processes.

Finally, language and identity are also highly sensitive issues in Ukraine’s post-2014 and post-2022 context. The Ukrainian language has become a key marker of identity, capable of either fuelling tensions or fostering inclusion. Young people observed that in areas where Ukrainian is the dominant language, IDP integration occurs more naturally, creating opportunities for social cohesion over time.

### **Germany: Contested Histories and Fragmented Solidarities**

In Germany, peace is understood through the lens of “Nie wieder” (Never again)—a commitment to preventing war and fascism that paradoxically creates tensions around contemporary conflicts. Youth grapple with how to reconcile Germany’s peace rhetoric with its massive arms exports and military involvement. This is particularly evident at present in the debates surrounding German support for Ukraine and Israel. Here, as in the dominant discourses on the imperialist policies of Russia and the USA, double standards and a discrepancy between public and publicised opinion are often criticised.

With the “Zeitenwende” turning point introduced by former Chancellor Olaf Scholz in 2022 in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the discourse on peace in Germany is also shifting increasingly. In view of hybrid threats, Germany is once again arming itself massively, questioning the suspension of conscription and reintroducing it on a voluntary basis from 2026. The peace movement, formerly present across the political spectrum, has been pushed to the margins, particularly since the Green Party significantly changed its position on this issue. Peace is once again primarily conceived in terms of hard security and deterrence, and spending on peacebuilding and humanitarian aid in crisis and conflict regions has been massively cut.

Critical voices against militarisation and in favour of peace initiatives are framed in public discourse as naive and unrealistic, or at least as indirect agents of Russia. The often-praised German concept of “Streitkultur” (constructive conflict culture) loses its relevance in public and private discussion. Youth note that this ideal often fails in practice, with dissent increasingly criminalized and debate polarized into irreconcilable camps (Berghof Foundation, 2023).

## 4.2 Value and competencies framework

The following section identifies specific values that can stimulate youth mobilization and engagement in peacebuilding. Future educational programmes should mainstream these values across knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

### Gradualism and Trust-Building

In Ukraine, young people emphasized that sudden, top-down changes often provoke resistance and intensify tensions. Gradual, step-by-step processes are more likely to foster community acceptance and trust. One youth participant explained: “You can’t change everything in one year—people simply won’t accept it. But if you take small steps, the result will be noticeable and accepted by everyone.” (IDI 13 – youth expert, Ukraine). Trust, in this context, is not an abstract goal but a practical precondition for transformation.

In Georgia, a key programmatic insight is the intentional mixing of social “bubbles”—bringing together youth from privileged and marginalized backgrounds, urban and rural areas, IDP and non-IDP communities, and majority and minority language groups. Sustained engagement within mixed cohorts allows social habits and solidarities to take root.

### Transparency and Accountability

Transparency emerged as a core democratic value, particularly in Ukraine. Young people expect clarity in resource allocation and decision-making processes. “We want to know where the money actually went and why this person was chosen over another,” stated a participant (IDI 2 – youth expert, Ukraine). Transparency reduces perceived injustice and increases willingness to engage in civic and institutional processes. Youth across contexts called for monitoring mechanisms, open budget practices, and inclusive selection processes, particularly in local government, youth councils, and civil society platforms.

### Critical Thinking and Media Literacy

In both Ukraine and Spain, the ability to think critically, assess sources, and debunk misinformation was seen as a foundational skill for peacebuilding and civic engagement. As disinformation spreads rapidly—often through influencers or politically motivated content—youth must be equipped with tools to analyse, question, and resist manipulation.

The study found that training in media literacy and interpersonal communication enhanced youth capacity to resolve conflict in a nonviolent way. Teaching young people to listen, empathize, and critically evaluate information fosters constructive dialogue and deliberation.

### Sustainability in Youth Participation

The meaning of sustainability varies across contexts, but a shared goal is to move beyond symbolic participation toward structural inclusion.

In Ukraine, sustainability is linked to institutionalizing youth participation through mechanisms such as Youth Councils, which enable co-creation and shared decision-making. In Georgia, sustainability was defined as the availability of long-term support structures—including alumni networks, ongoing mentoring, municipal co-funding, and multi-year grant mechanisms that reinforce continuity and ownership.

These approaches recognize that youth participation must be resourced, recognized, and rooted in institutional frameworks to become impactful over time.

### **Empowerment and Imagination**

Empowerment emerged as a multidimensional need, encompassing strategic thinking, leadership development, and effective communication. Youth across contexts emphasized the importance of building the capacity to imagine alternative futures, grounded in democratic values and linked to concrete proposals and collective actions.

This involves both individual competences and collaborative infrastructures that support visioning, organizing, and implementing change. Youth programming should include not only capacity building, but also spaces for creativity, critique, and political imagination.

### **Intersectional and Rights-Based Approaches**

A consistent recommendation across all countries is to apply an intersectional, human rights-based approach. This includes understanding the differential impacts of conflict and inequality across dimensions such as class, gender, ethnicity, language, geography, and ability.

From this recognition, it is essential to design policies and programs that actively prevent discrimination, promote justice, and affirm equal access and dignity. Conflict transformation must center inclusive rights frameworks that elevate marginalized voices and repair historic harms.

### **Language, Identity, and Youth-Centered Communication**

In Spain, youth workers emphasized that traditional civic messaging often fails to resonate with young people because it overlooks new languages, codes, and forms of organizing. To effectively mobilize youth, practitioners must first understand how young people express themselves—digitally, emotionally, and politically. In this context, nonviolence must be reimaged not as passivity or appeasement, but as a strategic and expressive avenue for transforming rage into action. While in Ukraine, national identity and language are core elements that explain the relentless struggle and resilience of the society.

Nonviolent approaches offer youth concrete tools to channel frustration into civil disobedience, community organizing, artistic intervention, and future-oriented visioning. These practices allow youth not only to resist oppressive structures, but to propose alternatives grounded in justice, solidarity, and collective dignity.

## **4.3 Strategies, lessons learned and case studies**

The following section outlines effective strategies for promoting youth empowerment and participation in the fields of peacebuilding, nonviolence, and human rights advocacy. Selected approaches are illustrated through case studies identified across the countries examined.

### **Guided contact linked to peace skills**

Youth exchanges, dialogue camps, and mixed-cohort workshops are effective when they combine contact with clear structure and purpose. Ground rules for listening, Nonviolent Communication

(NVC) and a joint, practical task, such as a school initiative, a neighbourhood fix, a podcast, or a class exhibition, help translate dialogue into shared achievement. These formats create “wins” that are hard to politicise. As one participant said, “Camps and small projects are the most real—you come away with friends, not just ideas.” (FGD 3 – rural youth/IDPs, Georgia). Erasmus+ and similar programs can expand this model across borders, adding comparative perspectives and peer learning from other European contexts.

Specialized coaching and mentoring is especially relevant for guiding youth in their professional careers, including job opportunities, scholarships and financial literacy. This process should be reinforced with solid training programs. In this regard, young people consistently identify livelihoods as the missing track. Create “first-job peace labs”, paid internships or apprenticeships that combine work experience with NVC, conflict literacy, and civic navigation. Employers should be partners, and skills should be certified so they travel with the youth.

### Case study #1: “16th Element” (Georgia)

Originally catalysed by the Georgian organization [Institute for Study of Nationalism and Conflicts](#), and now self-organised, the youth-led platform “16th Element” shows what ownership and continuity look like: a peer-run home for NVC, conflict analysis, content creation, and local micro-projects. Here, young people practice leadership, focus on conflict transformation and peacebuilding, raise awareness, build skills, and organise without being swallowed by politics.

### Micro-resources and mentoring

Small grants, travel stipends, and the support of a designated mentor enable young people to test their ideas without reputational or financial risk, particularly in contexts where activism and community organizing may lead to labelling or social backlash. The use of neutral venues and careful framing, focused on safety, well-being, or school climate—serves as a narrative shield, helping to ensure that participation remains safe and inclusive. Municipal co-funding mechanisms that complement donor micro-grants can further enhance sustainability, allowing alumni-led initiatives to continue beyond the formal project cycle.

### Case study #2: Micro-grants with mentoring (Georgia)

Across regions, youth workers highlighted small grants that backed different teams to do something tangible—a school anti-bullying drive, a community clean-up, or a student-run debate series. The common result was not just an output; it was new ties that cut across status lines.”

### Self-organized local initiatives

Young people have taken the lead in volunteer work, raising funds for humanitarian purposes, community resilience and resistance. These efforts not only meet urgent needs but also weave stronger social bonds. Volunteering becomes both a form of solidarity and a civic classroom,

where youth learn responsibility, trust, and collective action. This community organized work, empower communities, create new leadership and develop skills for political and public engagement.

### **Case study #3: Volunteer initiatives (Ukraine).**

Youth-led volunteer efforts have focused on both material support and social cohesion. Young people organized fundraisers, cultural events, and community gatherings to strengthen local ties. “We held a concert in the community, and it was not only about music, but also about a sense of unity,” said a participant from the Lviv region (Online Survey in Ukraine, 2025).

These initiatives show that volunteer activities can be a tool for building trust and solidarity, while simultaneously addressing community needs. Moreover, transparency in operations and active partnership with local authorities enhance the credibility of volunteer initiatives and strengthen trust between youth and the broader community.

### **Youth Civic engagement**

Beyond volunteering and culture, young people are taking part in the civic life of their communities through open discussions, youth councils, and local initiatives on inclusion and development. These forms of engagement move youth from spectators to actors, enabling them to influence local decision-making, advocate for diverse interests, and strengthen democratic habits. Through participation, they learn how to debate, negotiate, and reach results that benefit the broader community.

In the field of gender equality, organising workshops and courses for young people in youth centres are effective strategies and should be combined with mobile units to reach young people in rural areas. In addition, mental health work requires psychoeducation programmes, youth exchanges, and psychosocial activities, which can be organised around youth hubs.

### **Case study #4: Youth councils as mechanisms of influence (Ukraine)**

Despite initial scepticism toward formal structures, some youth councils have evolved into real instruments of participation. They have successfully influenced local budgets and secured funding for youth priorities. “We convinced the authorities to allocate money for educational training for young people,” recalled a participant from the Sumy region (IDI 3 – youth worker, Ukraine). Such examples prove that transparent dialogue and persistence can turn formal bodies into platforms for tangible change, though these remain exceptions that need scaling and institutional backing.

## School-level transformation

According to experts consulted, schools are often characterized by bureaucratic structures and a lack of democratic practices, such as opportunities for political participation. However, transforming these institutions is essential to enable the integration of peace education and foster a more participatory and inclusive learning environment.

When teachers shift from “projects for students” to student-led projects, introduce anti-bullying protocols, and ensure access to school psychologists, small conflicts de-escalate and student voice grows. “In public schools there is sometimes humiliation—this kills motivation,” one teacher noted (FGD 1 – youth expert, Georgia). Psychologists and clear rules reverse that message and normalise respectful disagreement. Partnering with schools and universities can embed NVC, psychologist hours, and student-led projects into annual plans, while teacher training and higher education curricula make conflict sensitivity a routine competency.

The combination of non-formal and formal education formats is effective for discussing and addressing societal issues. For instance, methodologies such as art therapy within schools are well suited to identifying collective and personal trauma, which often underlie patterns of violence. Educational institutions should be open to these new approaches and also to adopt inclusive education systems to ensure the outreach of vulnerable groups in society.

Additionally, it is essential to support teachers by providing new content and tools, release time, short micro-credentials, supervision circles, and a hotline for complex cases such as bullying or politicised labelling. Without adult capacity and support, classroom and community-level changes will stall.

### Case study #5: Peace education in formal education (Georgia)

Practical sessions where young people build skills in communication, leadership, and handling disagreement—while learning to connect lived experience to policy through role-plays, NVC drills, debate formats, and short policy labs. The [Center for Peace and Civic Development’s](#) work to embed peace education and conflict-sensitive approaches across general and higher education is especially important: it shifts these competencies from one-off projects into curricula, teacher practice, and assessment, making them routine and sustainable

## Bridge divides: sustain cohorts and create safe spaces

Actively mix youth across urban/rural, IDP/non-IDP, minority/majority language, and socioeconomic lines. Maintain these mixed cohorts through alumni mentoring, follow-up micro-grants, and ongoing networking. Local NGOs, universities, and international partners can coordinate residential camps and follow-up activities that turn short-term exchanges into lasting peer networks.

Promote and maintain physical and digital venues, schools, libraries, municipal youth hubs, with explicit non-labelling guarantees, crisis-communication templates, and facilitation support. Framing around “youth safety,” “school climate,” or “community wellbeing” helps shield participants and keeps spaces open to diverse groups.

For instance, in Georgia, where conditions permit, it is important to continue low-visibility confidence-building initiatives with Abkhaz and South Ossetian peers, focusing on less politically sensitive topics such as environmental cooperation or professional exchanges. To ensure that these interactions are constructive and do not pose risks to participants, youth should be adequately prepared through training in NVC, the use of narrative shields to protect against misinterpretation or labelling, and structured debriefing sessions. These measures help ensure that cross-community contact strengthens trust rather than exposing participants to harm.

In highly politicised topics and particularly polarised conflicts, regional formats can create more scope for action and greater security. Regional dialogue is a promising approach to address and bypass some of the identified challenges. They create a conflict-neutral umbrella, a safe room for dialogue, and a dialogic space with different and overlapping frictions, which help to transform the “us-vs.-them” setting. The focus on cross-cutting issues instead of conflict-specific problem enables a change of perspective and facilitate learning from different experiences.

#### Case study #6: Regional dialogue platforms (South Caucasus)

Advancing Young Scholars and Peacebuilders Careers was a multiyear regional dialogue and capacity building process led by [Corridors – Dialogue through Cooperation](#). It created a safe space for young activists from Georgia/Abkhazia, Armenia and Azerbaijan and aimed to extend and diversify the narrow peacebuilding bubble in the region. The regional framework enabled continued exchange and cooperation despite increasingly limited scope for action due to societal scepticism toward dialogue with “the other” and increased insecurity, including active hostilities between target communities.

Not only was it possible to create safe spaces for dialogue and learning, but also to publicly showcase and advocate for the project results of the young peacebuilders. Ultimately, some participants were even able to implement small regional pilot projects that they had developed within the dialogue. This led to practical cooperation between Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian participants in a joint capacity building project for youth. Such joint initiative over the conflict-divide is particular rare in the Armenian-Azerbaijani case and benefited significantly from the regional framework and the careful implementation of conflict-sensitive approaches.

In Ukraine, meetings among internally displaced persons, veterans, and local youth have emerged as one of the most valuable practices for rebuilding trust. A key informant stated: “When we started listening to each other, it turned out that our problems were similar,” (IDI 9 – youth expert, Ukraine). These dialogues reveal shared needs—security, stability, access to work and education—and transform them into opportunities for cooperation. Often, they become launching points for joint projects, from cultural events to volunteer drives, replacing stereotypes with solidarity.



### Case study #7: Inclusive dialogue platforms (Ukraine)

In several communities, young people took the initiative to organize dialogues between veterans, IDPs, and residents. These platforms allowed participants to share perspectives, identify common challenges, and reduce tensions within the community. In this line, a youth worker from Mykolaiv region noted: “When we sat down at the same table, we realized that we had the same problems, we just looked at them from different angles,” (IDI 13 – youth worker, Ukraine). This experience demonstrates that creating safe, structured spaces for dialogue can foster mutual understanding and social cohesion. A key lessons learned is effective inclusive dialogue requires actively involving all relevant groups and ensuring a safe environment where participants feel comfortable expressing their perspectives.

### Raising Ethical Youth Leaders Through Value Transformation, Competence Development, and Community Engagement

Youth living in marginalized suffer from high vulnerability and are exposed to acute tensions and violence. This constrains their capacity for self-development, envisioning new futures and motivation to deal with their challenges. Interventions in these contexts, require a systematic engagement to increase their motivation, competences and transform their attitudes and values. It is also essential to involve the community in this process and especially their families.

In Georgia, there are key practices to promote intergenerational storytelling such as oral-history labs and memory dialogues to reduce hostility in mixed groups, giving youth language for emotions and overcome intergenerational frictions. Extend impact beyond youth spaces through family dialogues and parent workshops. This helps shift social norms, reduces backlash against girls, young women, and minority youth.

In Spain, youth workers are exploring the intersections between formal, non-formal, and informal educational settings as a key strategy to support young people at risk of social exclusion. The Vitamina Program serves as a compelling case study, grounded in a framework that integrates group psychology, collective and emotional intelligence, and ethical development. This youth development initiative is driven by the participants themselves and aims to build capacities and transform values and attitudes through active engagement with the practical, local, and concrete challenges they face in their communities.

### Case Study #8: Vitamina program for youth transformation in marginalized areas (Spain)

Vitamina program is a four-year leadership development program, empowered by the [International Institute for Nonviolence \(NOVACT\)](#), for youth aged 13 to 17 at risk of social exclusion. It strengthens socio-emotional skills and ethical leadership through a structured, group-based methodology. The program unfolds across four progressive axes:

- Axis 1: Personal Leadership focuses on emotional self-awareness and regulation.
- Axis 2: Relational Leadership develops conflict resolution and empathy.
- Axis 3: Social-Entrepreneurial Leadership engages youth in team-based community transformation projects.
- Axis 4: Future-Oriented Leadership supports life planning and autonomy through mentorship.

Each axis integrates key values such as Autonomy, Trust, Creativity, and Emancipation. Youth begin together and grow as a group, culminating in certification as Ethical Leaders. In parallel, Vitamina Family Groups are offered monthly for families and tutors (optional participation). These sessions mirror the youth methodology and aim to equip caregivers with tools to support systemic impact and positive youth development across intervention zones.

### Cultural and artistic projects.

Creative expression, through theatre, art, music, or photography, has become a way to process collective trauma and generate empathy. “We created an art project about the war, and it became a way to express our emotions,” said a participant from the Kharkiv region (IDI 8 – youth worker, Ukraine). Such cultural initiatives not only help individuals cope with loss but also open space for dialogue and mutual understanding. Art thus serves as a social glue, building a shared narrative amid fragmentation.

### Partnerships with civil society organizations.

Collaboration with NGOs has provided young people with access to resources, training, and new working formats. Through such partnerships, youth have combined learning on human rights, inclusion, and critical thinking with practical tools for running their own initiatives. For many, this cooperation marked a first step toward building networks, self-confidence, and project ownership. Civil society partnerships also connect local action to national and international agendas, strengthening young people’s sense of belonging and purpose.

### Conditions for sustainability.

For all these efforts to endure, they need more than enthusiasm, they require resources, transparency, mentoring, and institutional support. Youth emphasize that even active initiatives risk fading without structural backing. Mentorship and partnerships with experienced organizations are key to developing capable young leaders and ensuring continuity. Municipal co-funding, open reporting, and long-term mentoring frameworks can turn short-term projects into lasting platforms for civic resilience.

## **Gradual conflict prevention strategies**

First, conflict prevention through social cohesion, including awareness-raising campaigns, the dissemination of educational and life skills, and the creation of safe community spaces. These efforts should be supported by accreditation and recognition systems for innovative teaching methodologies, as well as by rosters of trained educators and professionals.

Second, preventing escalation through peer-to-peer initiatives and by strengthening community agency. This level also requires improved regulation and oversight of social media and technology companies to address hate speech and disinformation, alongside the expansion of fact-checking initiatives and media-literacy strategies targeting young people. These actions should be complemented by communication campaigns developed in cooperation with social media creators and other societal actors.

Third, preventing recurrence and fostering reparation and healing through participatory projects co-designed with stakeholders, collective mental health initiatives, and historical-memory and cultural activities that celebrate life and resilience. These efforts should be supported by the creation and strengthening of cross-sectoral networks.

## **Nonviolence: community and digital organizing**

In the face of emerging global conflicts and the increasing militarization of societies, nonviolence offers both a philosophical framework and a strategic toolkit for social transformation, rooted in democratic and progressive values. International movements such as the Global Sumud Flotilla, Black Lives Matter, and Brazil's Landless Workers Movement have effectively employed nonviolent strategies in their struggles, offering compelling examples of their potential impact.

Georgia, Ukraine, and Spain also share a history of popular mobilizations where nonviolence has served as a powerful vehicle for collective action. From Georgia's Rose Revolution, to the widespread civil resistance of Ukrainians against the Russian invasion, to Spain's 15M movement, youth have played a pivotal role in mobilizing and sustaining these efforts. Today, nonviolence continues to serve as a key strategy for resisting military aggression and authoritarianism, while defending justice, democracy, and human rights.

Approaches such as community organizing, mass protests, civil disobedience, boycotts, and strategic communication constitute a growing repertoire of nonviolent action used by youth and activists to confront systemic challenges. In this landscape, digital organizing has become increasingly vital—helping communities to mobilize through secure platforms, resist digital surveillance, and foster international solidarity.

One illustrative example is the educational program Digital Organizing developed by NOVACT, which disseminates nonviolent tools and strategies to support the creation of global solidarity movements—bridging digital spaces and on-the-ground activism in cities and communities worldwide.

### Case Study #9: Youth Act (Spain)

The civil society organization Service Civil International de Catalunya (SCI-Cat) has developed the [Youth Act program](#) to empower and equip young people with nonviolent tools for advocacy, communication, and community mobilization in response to both international and domestic conflicts. A defining feature of the program is its youth-centered approach, which allows participants to shape actions based on their own needs, priorities, and areas of interest.

In recent years, SCI-Cat has implemented structured participatory processes, enabling youth to define the program’s priorities from the outset through inclusive and deliberative dialogue. Another added value of Youth Act is its international perspective, which fosters engagement among youth activists from Spain, Colombia, and Palestine. The program is structured in phases that combine national-level actions with international forums, where activists meet in person to exchange best practices, identify shared challenges, and co-develop joint initiatives.

A key outcome is the strengthening of international solidarity to address transnational issues. Additionally, Youth Act includes a collaborative research component aimed at [mapping social movements and struggles](#), which supports the identification of partners, tools, and best practices worldwide.

## 5. Conceptual Framework: Transformative Conflict-Sensitivity

Building on the empirical findings from our four research contexts, this section develops a theoretical framework that integrates community wisdom with scholarly insights to propose a new approach to conflict-sensitive youth work and peace education. Our research reveals that young people across Georgia, Ukraine, Spain, and Germany experience conflict not as isolated events but as ongoing conditions woven into the fabric of daily life. These realities demand a conceptual response that moves beyond technical harm mitigation toward fundamental transformation of the conditions that generate violent conflict. Transformative conflict-sensitivity emerges as a synthesis of what communities are already practicing with what research tells us about effective engagement with conflict dynamics.

### 5.1 Understanding Conflict and Violence

Practice requires clarity about how conflict, violence, and transformation relate to one another. The relationship between conflict and transformation represents a fundamental tension: conflict simultaneously destroys and potentially transforms, divides and eventually connects, silences and eventually speaks. Our empirical findings reveal that young people experience conflict as ongoing conditions affecting how individuals and communities function, relate, and envision their futures.

A key insight is that conflict and violence are not synonymous. Conflict—the clash of interests, values, or needs—is inherent to social life and can drive positive change. Violence, by contrast, represents a

particular way of engaging with conflict that causes harm. Transformative conflict-sensitivity seeks to support nonviolent conflict while preventing and addressing violence in its multiple forms.

### **From Resolution to Transformation**

The distinction between conflict resolution and conflict transformation is foundational. While resolution focuses on ending visible violence and reaching agreements, transformation asks a different question. As Lederach (1997, 75) articulates: “How do we end something not desired and build something we do desire?” This dual focus—addressing immediate harm while constructing new relational and structural conditions—defines transformative practice.

Our research reveals three critical insights. First, conflict is structural, but transformation is collective. While conflict is often framed as interpersonal disputes, our participants consistently recognized its structural dimensions—economic systems, political institutions, educational structures, and cultural narratives. Effective response requires collective action addressing these systemic conditions.

Second, individual changes must translate to socio-political action. Peace education that changes individual attitudes without building capacity for collective action may produce graduates who think differently but cannot act effectively—precisely the gap Ukrainian participants identified: “We can organize a festival, but we cannot influence the council’s decisions.” The pathway from individual learning to socio-political change must be designed, not assumed.

Third, communities possess their own wisdom about conflict and peace. Lederach’s (1995) elicitive approach draws from local cultural resources rather than imposing external models, positioning people in conflict settings as “resources rather than recipients.”

### **Violence Operates Across Multiple Dimensions**

Violence is not limited to physical harm. Galtung’s (1969, 1990) distinction between direct, structural, and cultural violence helps explain why conflicts persist even when visible fighting stops. Direct violence—bombs, bullets, physical assault—is what we typically recognize. Ukrainian participants live with this daily: systematic shelling, air raid sirens, constant danger. Yet direct violence is sustained by deeper foundations.

Structural violence refers to harm embedded in social systems: economic exploitation, political exclusion, institutionalized discrimination. Unlike direct violence, it operates without identifiable perpetrators. Our research documented structural violence across all contexts: political marginalization of ethnic and linguistic minorities in Georgia; discrimination against people with migration backgrounds in Germany; housing costs pricing Spanish youth out of cities; “opportunity deserts” in rural Ukraine with scarce employment and weak services. As Georgian participants from ethnic minority backgrounds noted, they “have to work twice as hard to prove their competence”—a manifestation of structural barriers that operate daily without visible perpetrators. Cultural violence legitimizes both direct and structural forms, making oppression appear natural or inevitable. It operates through narratives, histories, and assumptions about who belongs and matters. We found cultural violence in narratives portraying young people as “not yet ready” for participation; far-right discourse targeting marginalized groups; educational systems transmitting uncritical nationalism while avoiding examination of their own histories of conflict.

For youth work, this means programs need to be aware of these violence dimensions. If young people learn to resolve individual disputes while structural violence excludes them from

opportunity and cultural violence stigmatizes their identities, no lasting peace has been built. Transformation requires engaging all three dimensions simultaneously.

### Overlapping Forms of Violence

People do not experience violence along single axes. Crenshaw’s (1989) concept of intersectionality reveals how multiple forms of marginalization compound and interact. Georgian ethnic minority youth face barriers from both ethnic discrimination and rural marginalization. German youth with migration backgrounds navigate racism, economic precarity, and expectations to constantly prove belonging. Ukrainian IDPs experience displacement, economic hardship, and gender-specific vulnerabilities simultaneously. This means programs designed for generic “youth” may fail specific groups whose intersecting identities create distinct experiences (Collins and Bilge 2020).

### Power Shapes How Conflict Unfolds

Understanding conflict requires analysing power. Veneklasen and Miller (2002) distinguish four forms: power over (domination through coercion and institutional authority), power with (collective strength through organization), power within (individual agency and self-worth), and power to (capacity to act and create change). Our research found power over operating through authoritarian educational practices, securitized civic space, and political suppression of youth voice. But we also found young people building power with through volunteer networks, dialogue initiatives, and activist organizing. Often missing was the connection between power within (which many possess) and power to (which structural barriers deny). Transformative conflict-sensitivity must address all four dimensions.

## 5.2 Theoretical Foundations

Building on these analytical distinctions, transformative conflict-sensitivity draws from multiple theoretical traditions. Rather than applying any single framework, we weave together complementary insights—each addressing dimensions that others leave incomplete.

### Everyday Peace and Local Agency

Critical peace studies emerged from recognition that liberal peacebuilding often reproduced the very inequalities that generated conflict (Richmond 2011). Mac Ginty’s (2021) concept of “everyday peace” offers an alternative starting point, attending to how ordinary people navigate conflict in daily life—the small accommodations, avoidances, and collaborations that allow divided communities to coexist. It reframes peace not as an end-state achieved through treaties but as ongoing practice embedded in routine interactions.

This connects to Lederach’s (2005) “moral imagination”—the capacity to envision relationships beyond current divisions while remaining grounded in present realities. Our research found this imagination actively suppressed where conflict narratives are politically weaponized. In Georgia and Ukraine, the term “peace” itself has become an instrument of delegitimization.

Mac Ginty’s (2010) “hybrid peace” adds a further insight: external interventions inevitably interact with local practices, producing outcomes neither purely “international” nor purely “local.” We observed this throughout: Ukrainian organizations integrating international trauma frameworks with local healing traditions; Spanish activists combining global nonviolent repertoires with Catalan resistance histories.



## Critical Consciousness and Transformative Pedagogy

Paulo Freire’s (1970) concept of conscientização (critical consciousness) provides the pedagogical foundation for transformative conflict-sensitivity. Freire recognized that oppression is maintained not only through material conditions but through consciousness—internalized beliefs that make inequality appear natural or inevitable. Critical consciousness is the process of perceiving social, political, and economic contradictions and acting against oppressive elements.

This involves learning to “read the world”—perceiving realities that were previously invisible or normalized—and “write the world”—taking action to transform unjust conditions (Freire 1985). The two are inseparable: understanding without action is empty verbalism; action without understanding is activism without direction. This directly addresses patterns in our research: young people who recognized systemic dimensions of their situations but lacked pathways for action—consciousness without praxis.

Freire’s critique of “banking education”—treating learners as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge—resonates with participants who reported that “no one teaches inquiry.” Banking education produces passivity; problem-posing education develops critical capacity and agency. Transformative approaches shift from expert answers to community-generated questions, from individual learning to collective organizing.

Ignacio Martín-Baró’s (1996) liberation psychology extends these insights to contexts of political violence and collective trauma. His emphasis on challenging dominant ideologies, recovering historical memory suppressed by official narratives, and drawing on community strengths connects personal transformation to collective change. We found these processes already occurring: Georgian youth using intergenerational storytelling to process conflict; German youth with migration backgrounds articulating post-integration visions of society. Critical peace education operationalizes these insights for learning contexts. Betty Reardon’s (1988) distinction between teaching about peace (transmitting knowledge) and teaching for peace (developing transformative capacities) remains essential. Unlike traditional peace education focused on individual behaviour change, critical peace education positions learners as agents, addresses structural and cultural violence alongside direct violence, and uses dialogical pedagogy (Bajaj and Hantzopoulos 2021).

Bajaj’s (2015) four competencies address gaps our research identified. Conflict mapping develops capacity to analyse historical roots and power relations beyond simplistic narratives. Agency and social location connect personal experience to systemic analysis—essential for Ukrainian IDPs or Georgian minorities who understand discrimination but may lack frameworks for collective response. Critical thinking builds capacity to interrogate dominant narratives and misinformation—urgently needed when, as Spanish participants noted, “youth tend to absorb content without questioning its origin.” Participation and solidarity move beyond individual attitude change to collective action and cross-group alliance-building.

## Decolonial Perspectives

Decolonial scholarship challenges assumptions that Western frameworks can be universally applied without reproducing colonial power relations. Sabaratnam’s (2017) analysis reveals how “neutral” statebuilding assistance reproduced racialized hierarchies—international experts positioned as knowing subjects, local actors as objects of intervention. When frameworks developed in Western academic institutions are exported globally, they risk

displacing indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms and delegitimizing local peace knowledge.

Our research contexts demand attention to these dynamics. Georgia's position between Euro-Atlantic integration aspirations and Russian influence makes "Western" peacebuilding methodologies politically charged. Spanish activists explicitly connected European militarization to "colonial and patriarchal logics." German youth with migration backgrounds challenged integration frameworks that demand constant proof of belonging while denying full acceptance—a colonial dynamic of perpetual probation.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos's (2014) concept of "cognitive justice" offers a constructive response: recognizing multiple valid knowledge systems as complete ways of understanding and engaging with conflict. Georgian community dialogues, Ukrainian peer support practices, and Spanish grassroots organizing represent sophisticated knowledge systems with their own coherence and effectiveness. They are not "alternatives" requiring external validation but primary sources from which theory should emerge.

This has practical implications: beginning with what communities already know and do; positioning external frameworks as resources communities may adapt rather than models to implement; measuring success by community-defined criteria; and remaining alert to how our own practices may reproduce the hierarchies we claim to challenge.

### **Complexity and Adaptive Practice**

Traditional conflict analysis applies linear thinking—identifying "root causes" and designing sequential interventions. Yet conflicts routinely defy such logic, persisting despite well-designed interventions or transforming in unexpected ways.

Complexity science offers different analytical tools. Conflicts operate as complex adaptive systems characterized by nonlinear dynamics, feedback loops, emergence, and sensitivity to initial conditions (Byrne and Callaghan 2014). This explains patterns that linear thinking cannot: why some conflicts resist decades of intervention while others transform rapidly; why successful approaches in one context fail in another.

Peter Coleman's (2011) research on "intractable conflicts" identifies how conflicts become "attractors"—stable patterns maintained by multiple reinforcing feedback loops. Parties develop identities organized around the conflict; institutions emerge that depend on its continuation; narratives become self-confirming. Breaking such patterns requires not addressing isolated "causes" but shifting the system's overall dynamics.

Cedric de Coning's (2023) "adaptive peacebuilding" translates this into practice. Rather than detailed implementation plans with predetermined outcomes, adaptive approaches focus on creating conditions for positive emergence: supporting community self-organization capacity, building feedback mechanisms that enable learning, remaining responsive as situations evolve, and accepting that outcomes cannot be fully controlled.

### **Toward Integration**

These traditions converge on principles central to transformative conflict-sensitivity: communities as knowledge-holders rather than recipients; transformation as collective rather than individual; peace

as ongoing practice rather than end-state; and attention to structural conditions rather than surface behaviours. They also share a commitment to questioning their own assumptions—recognizing that frameworks, including this one, can reproduce the dynamics they claim to challenge.

## 5.3 Guiding Principles

These theoretical foundations—from critical peace studies’ attention to everyday agency, through Freirean pedagogy’s emphasis on conscientização, to complexity science’s systems perspective—merge into five interrelated qualities that guide transformative approaches.

### 1) From Neutrality to Structural Engagement

Traditional conflict sensitivity often adopts neutrality as a professional stance, positioning practitioners as impartial actors facilitating dialogue between conflict parties. This approach assumes rough equality between parties and frames the practitioner’s role as balancing perspectives. Yet in contexts of asymmetric power, neutrality effectively endorses existing arrangements.

Our research reveals the limits of neutrality in certain contexts. In Georgia, where ‘peace’ discourse is weaponized to silence dissent, a neutral stance risks accepting this framing. In Spain, where far-right movements target marginalized youth through digital platforms, neutrality means treating hate speech as one perspective among many. In Germany, where structural racism produces ‘perpetual foreignness’ for youth with migration backgrounds, neutrality means accepting integration frameworks that demand constant proof of belonging.

Transformative conflict-sensitivity extends beyond neutrality toward structural engagement—actively analysing and addressing the power asymmetries and structural violence outlined previously. This doesn’t mean abandoning dialogue, but recognizing that genuine dialogue requires addressing power imbalances that prevent marginalized voices from being heard. Structural engagement means asking different questions: not only ‘how can we bring both sides together?’ but also ‘whose voices are systematically excluded, and what structural changes would enable their participation?’

### 2) Conflict as Catalyst for Change

Conventional approaches frame conflict as a problem to be managed, reduced, or resolved—something negative to be minimized. Yet as we established, conflict also reveals what is wrong—exposes injustice, mobilizes affected communities, and creates pressure for change that comfortable stability seldom produces. Building on Lederach’s (1997) insight that conflict is ‘a motor of change,’ transformative conflict-sensitivity recognizes that conflict signals structural tensions requiring transformation. The Georgian Rose Revolution, Ukrainian civil resistance, and Spain’s 15M movement—all referenced by our participants—demonstrate how conflict catalyses societal change when channelled through collective action.

This quality requires distinguishing between violent conflict (to be prevented) and nonviolent conflict (to be supported). Chenoweth and Stephan’s (2011) research demonstrates that nonviolent campaigns are more than twice as effective as violent ones, and campaigns mobilizing just 3.5% of the population have consistently succeeded. Supporting young people’s capacity for effective nonviolent action is key.

### 3) Communities as Producers of Peace

Needs-based approaches have made important contributions to understanding community challenges, yet they can inadvertently position conflict-affected communities primarily as populations requiring external solutions. When assessments focus mainly on what communities lack, they may overlook existing strengths and capacities. Drawing from Asset-Based Community Development (McKnight and Kretzmann 1993) and the decolonial emphasis on cognitive justice, transformative conflict-sensitivity positions communities as producers rather than consumers of peace. Communities possess assets—relationships, cultural practices, local knowledge—that constitute the primary resources for peacebuilding. External support’s role shifts from delivering solutions to strengthening existing capacities.

Our research documented rich community assets often invisible to institutional assessments. A Ukrainian participant from Sumy described how cultural practices became pathways to dialogue: “When we organized an evening of songs and traditional dishes, people saw that we respected their culture, and then it was easier to start talking about other important issues.” These are not merely coping mechanisms but sophisticated peace capacities deserving recognition and support on their own terms. Programs should begin by mapping assets rather than needs, with success measured by whether communities can sustain peace practices after external support ends.

### 4) Youth Agency

Protection-focused approaches to youth in conflict contexts serve vital functions—keeping young people safe from harm, shielding them from violence, providing services for those already affected. Yet protection alone, without attention to agency, can inadvertently position youth primarily as recipients of adult intervention. Transformative approaches seek to complement protection with meaningful participation.

Transformative conflict-sensitivity positions youth as active agents whose leadership is essential for genuine transformation—not future leaders being prepared for eventual responsibility, but leaders now, with unique perspectives, capacities, and stakes in outcomes. This aligns with UNSCR 2250’s paradigm shift from viewing young people as ‘either victims or perpetrators’ to recognizing them as ‘agents of positive transformation’ (United Nations Security Council 2015).

Our research found young people already exercising agency despite structural constraints: Ukrainian volunteers maintaining community solidarity under bombardment; Georgian activists sustaining dialogue despite political risks; Spanish organizers building movements through digital platforms. The challenge is not creating youth agency where none exists but recognizing and supporting agency already being exercised.

This requires confronting what Berents and McEvoy-Levy (2021) call ‘adulthood’—systematic marginalization of young people from decision-making based on assumptions about their inexperience. Georgian participants described this dynamic: “Despite all we do, we are not regarded as a person who is already an adult and has their own opinion—we are told to ‘wait your turn.’” The ‘nothing about us without us’ principle demands genuine power-sharing from program design through evaluation (Simpson 2018). Young people should be co-designers, co-implementers, and co-evaluators—not participants consulted about decisions already made.



### 5) Systems Thinking and Adaptive Practice

Programmatic approaches to conflict-sensitivity—identifying problems, designing interventions, implementing activities, measuring outputs—provide valuable structure. Yet conflicts operate as complex adaptive systems where interventions produce unintended consequences, feedback loops amplify small changes, and emergence generates outcomes no one predicted (Coleman 2011). Transformative conflict-sensitivity applies systems thinking to understand how conflicts operate as dynamic systems, where actions trigger reactions that reinforce the original problem. Breaking such patterns requires not addressing individual ‘causes’ but shifting the system’s overall dynamics.

Systems thinking moves intervention strategy beyond controlling outcomes toward creating conditions for positive emergence (de Coning 2023). Alongside implementation plans, design can focus on building community capacity for self-organization, establishing feedback mechanisms for learning and adaptation, and remaining responsive to evolving situations. Success can be measured not only by predetermined indicators but also by whether communities develop increased capacity to navigate conflict constructively.

Meadows’s (2008) leverage points framework helps identify where interventions can produce significant change. Lower-leverage points address parameters and buffers—providing services, changing numbers. Higher-leverage points address system goals, rules, and paradigms. Much current youth work operates at lower leverage—providing training, building individual skills—while higher-leverage interventions addressing power relations, institutional structures, and underlying paradigms remain rare. A Georgian expert captured this limitation: “There are no livelihoods programmes—we stop at raising awareness.” Transformative conflict-sensitivity must identify and engage these higher leverage points.

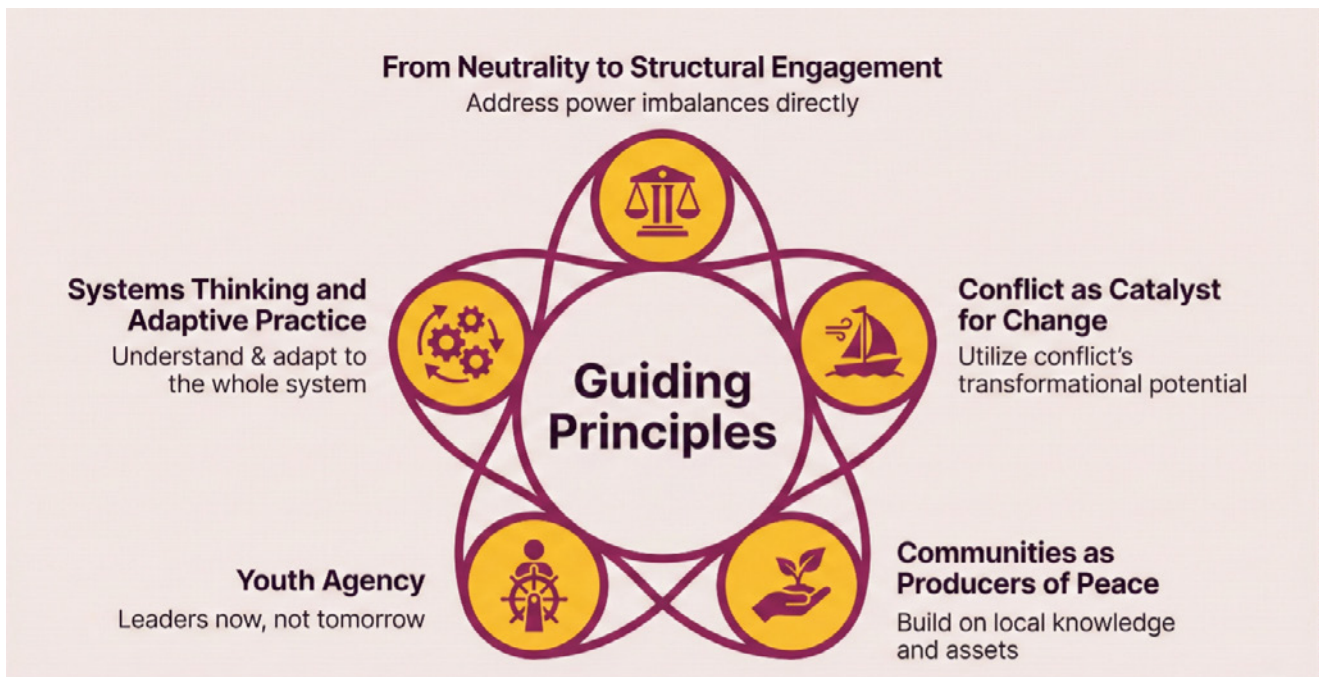


Figure 1 Guiding Principles of Transformative Conflict-Sensitivity

## 5.4 Relevance for Youth Work and Peacebuilding

The conceptual framework of transformative conflict-sensitivity responds to concrete challenges facing youth workers and peace educators across diverse contexts. Traditional approaches—while valuable—often prove insufficient to address the structural dimensions of these challenges. Transformative conflict-sensitivity offers a complementary orientation that can strengthen and deepen existing practice.

### Why This Matters Now

Several converging trends make transformative approaches particularly urgent. Violent conflicts are increasingly manifest as ongoing conditions woven into daily life. Our research reveals shared patterns: young people navigating environments shaped by war discourse and securitization, shrinking civic space, growing social polarization, economic precarity, and dominant narratives that dismiss their agency. These are not exceptional circumstances requiring specialized intervention but persistent realities demanding adapted practice. Youth expressed frustration with symbolic participation that offers voice without influence, pointing to the need for approaches that explicitly design pathways from individual learning to collective action.

### Implications for Youth Work Practice

Transformative conflict-sensitivity reorients rather than replaces existing practice. For youth workers, this means complementing programme delivery with ‘accompaniment’—walking alongside young people as they develop their own analysis and action. The Spanish concept of *acompañamiento* captures this: youth workers become neither therapists nor teachers but companions along young people’s journey toward both wellbeing and agency.

For programme design, the framework suggests beginning with collaborative conflict and asset analysis rather than standardized curricula. This means investing time to understand how conflict operates locally—what forms structural violence takes, what cultural narratives legitimize it, how young people are positioned within power structures—and what strengths communities already possess. Programmes should explicitly design the pathway from individual learning through collective organizing to structural engagement, rather than assuming these connections will emerge spontaneously.

The emphasis on systems thinking has practical implications for how interventions are conceived. Rather than targeting isolated variables—individual attitudes, specific skills—practitioners can attend to leverage points where change might shift broader dynamics. Helping young people access previously hidden information about decision-making processes, and supporting their capacity to form groups, develop shared analysis, and take collective action, creates structural conditions for ongoing transformation.

### Contribution to Peacebuilding

The framework makes several contributions to peacebuilding practice. First, it offers a pathway for operationalizing the Youth, Peace and Security agenda established by UNSCR 2250. By centering youth as peacebuilders now rather than future leaders in waiting, and by connecting individual programmes to structural change, this approach helps translate policy aspirations into practice. Second, it strengthens local agency by positioning communities as producers of peace. Rather than importing external solutions, practitioners begin with what communities already know and

do—recognizing local peace capacities as primary resources deserving support on their own terms. Third, it creates conditions for sustainable peace practices. By building self-organization capacity and designing for emergence rather than delivery, programmes can leave behind strengthened communities rather than dependency on continued external support.

The approach developed here is simultaneously practical and visionary. It is practical because it builds on what communities are already doing, requiring not entirely new systems but recognition and strengthening of existing assets. It is visionary because it imagines youth work and peace education as practices contributing to collective transformation—addressing not only the symptoms of conflict but the structural conditions that generate it. The guiding principles—structural engagement, conflict as catalyst, communities as producers, youth agency, and systems thinking—offer orientations for practice across diverse contexts. Implemented thoughtfully alongside established approaches, they can support young people in transforming both themselves and the systems they inhabit.

## 6. Conclusion

The findings of this report illuminate a critical moment in the evolution of conflict sensitivity: a point at which traditional models must be not only reformed but fundamentally reimaged to meet the pressing challenges of our time. In the face of war, authoritarian resurgence, climate breakdown, economic instability, and rising social polarization, young people are simultaneously the most impacted and the most potent agents of change. Their voices, aspirations, and lived experiences must no longer be considered secondary or symbolic, but central to any peacebuilding framework that claims to be just, inclusive, and sustainable.

Across Georgia, Germany, Spain and Ukraine the research highlights how systemic barriers, ranging from disempowering narratives and exclusionary education systems to economic precarity and securitized civic space—hinder youth agency and erode trust in institutions. Yet, in spite of these constraints, youth continue to mobilize, organize, and imagine alternatives. Their participation is not passive but strategic, creative, and values-driven, informed by local realities and global solidarities. This underscores the need for a shift in both practice and perspective: from technocratic models of conflict sensitivity toward approaches that are intersectional, participatory, and emancipatory.

Transformative Conflict Sensitivity, as proposed in this report, is not merely about avoiding harm or managing difference, it is about unlocking the potential of young people as co-creators of peace, equity, and democratic renewal. This requires building ecosystems that support youth in their full complexity, recognizing the interplay of class, gender, race, displacement, and geography in shaping experiences of violence and resilience. It also means embracing nonviolence not as a static ideal but as a living practice that equips youth to address injustice, resist repression, and construct alternative futures through community organizing, cultural expression, and policy advocacy.

The report demonstrates that change is already underway. Youth-led initiatives, from micro-grants and peer mentoring to artistic interventions and digital campaigns, are reshaping the peacebuilding landscape from the ground up. These efforts point to a new kind of infrastructure: one rooted in trust, equity, and collaboration. Civil society organizations, schools, donors,

municipalities, and international actors each have a role to play in reinforcing this infrastructure by offering resources, recognition, and long-term support. Without such backing, even the most dynamic initiatives risk exhaustion and fragmentation.

Ultimately, this report affirms that reimagining conflict sensitivity through the lens of youth is not an abstract exercise, it is a necessary and urgent step toward transformative social change. The generation coming of age today is inheriting a world marked by crisis, but also filled with untapped possibility. Empowering youth with tools, spaces, and recognition is not an act of charity or strategy, it is a moral imperative. As young people continue to envision and enact new paths forward, the responsibility of the broader peacebuilding community is to listen, learn, and walk beside them, not ahead of them.

In this spirit, Transformative Conflict Sensitivity is not a fixed model but a living framework, open to adaptation, rooted in justice, and grounded in hope. It demands humility, courage, and collective imagination. Most of all, it demands that we believe in the power of youth not just to change the future, but to reconstitute the present in more inclusive, participatory, and peaceful ways.

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## 8. Annexes

### ANNEX 1 - List of respondents

| Code   | Country | Type of key informant                     | Additional profile information                           | Specific location                   |
|--------|---------|---|--|-------------------------------------|
| FGD 1  | Georgia | Youth workers                             | Youth movements  | Tbilisi                             |
| FGD 2  | Georgia | Youth workers                             | Civil society organizations                              | Kakheti                             |
| FGD 3  | Georgia | Youth                                     | Youth rural, IDPs, conflict-affected area                | Tbilisi                             |
| FGD 4  | Georgia | Youth mixed, ethnic, religious minorities | Youth mixed, ethnic, religious minorities                | Kobuleti                            |
| IDI 1  | Georgia | Youth expert                              | Civil society organization                               | Tbilisi                             |
| IDI 2  | Georgia | Youth Expert                              | Civil society organization                               | Tbilisi                             |
| IDI 3  | Georgia | Youth Expert                              | Civil society organization                               | Zugdidi                             |
| IDI 4  | Georgia | Youth Expert                              | Civil society organization                               | Tbilisi                             |
| FGD 1  | Spain   | Youth worker                              | Civil society organization "                             | Barcelona, Catalonia                |
| FGD 2  | Spain   | Youth worker                              | Civil society organization                               | Barcelona, Catalonia                |
| IDI 1  | Spain   | Youth expert                              | University   | Barcelona, Catalonia                |
| IDI 2  | Spain   | Youth expert                              | University   | Barcelona, Catalonia                |
| IDI 3  | Spain   | Youth expert                              | Civil society organization                               | Barcelona, Catalonia                |
| IDI 1  | Ukraine | Youth worker                              | Civil society organization                               | Kivertsi, Volyn region              |
| IDI 2  | Ukraine | Youth worker                              | Youth center   | Vasylkiv, Kyiv region               |
| IDI 3  | Ukraine | Youth worker                              | Civil society organization                               | Sumy, Sumy region                   |
| IDI 4  | Ukraine | Youth worker                              | Civil society organization, IDP from Zaporizhzhia region | Kyiv                                |
| IDI 5  | Ukraine | Youth worker                              | Civil society organization                               | Kropyvnytskyi, Kirovohrad region    |
| IDI 6  | Ukraine | Youth expert                              | Youth Council  | Rzhyschiv, Kyiv region              |
| IDI 7  | Ukraine | Youth worker                              | Civil society organization                               | Oleksandriya, Kirovohrad region     |
| IDI 8  | Ukraine | Youth worker                              | Civil society organization "                             | Zmiiv, Kharkiv region               |
| IDI 9  | Ukraine | Youth expert                              | Youth Center   | Vinnytsia (IDP from Donetsk region) |
| IDI 10 | Ukraine | Youth worker                              | Youth Council  | Pyriatyn, Poltava region            |
| IDI 11 | Ukraine | Youth worker                              | Civil society organization                               | Kirovograd region                   |
| IDI 12 | Ukraine | Youth worker                              | Civil society organization                               | Pereiaslav, Kyiv region             |
| IDI 13 | Ukraine | Youth worker                              | Civil society organization                               | Mykolaiv, Mykolaiv region           |
| IDI 14 | Ukraine | Youth expert                              | Regional and local authority, civil society organization | Bila Tserkva, Kyiv region           |
| IDI 15 | Ukraine | Youth expert                              | Local authority  | Podilsk, Odesa region               |

## ANNEX 2 - List of participants research workshop Barcelona “Transformative Conflict-Sensitive Youth Work” (December 2025)

| Code | Country | Type of key informant | Additional profile information   | Specific location |
|------|---------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1    | Georgia | Youth expert          | University                       | Rustavi           |
| 2    | Georgia | Youth expert          | University                       | Tbilisi           |
| 3    | Georgia | Youth activist        | Youth IDP                        | Tbilisi           |
| 4    | Georgia | Youth activist        | Volunteer                        | Gori              |
| 5    | Georgia | Youth activist        | Youth IDP                        | Gali, Abkhazia    |
| 6    | Georgia | Youth worker          | Civil society organization       | Tbilisi           |
| 7    | Spain   | Youth worker          | Volunteer                        | Barcelona         |
| 8    | Spain   | Youth worker          | Civil society organization       | Barcelona         |
| 9    | Spain   | Youth expert          | Civil society organization       | Barcelona         |
| 10   | Spain   | Youth expert          | Civil society organization       | Barcelona         |
| 11   | Germany | Youth worker          | International cooperation agency | Frankfurt         |
| 12   | Germany | Youth expert          | Media                            | Berlin            |
| 13   | Italy   | Youth worker          | Professional                     | Bologna           |
| 14   | Ukraine | Youth expert          | Civil society organization       | Kyiv              |
| 15   | Ukraine | Youth expert          | Civil society organization       | Kyiv              |
| 16   | Ukraine | Youth worker          | Civil society organization       | Kyiv              |
| 17   | Ukraine | Youth worker          | Civil society organization       | Zhytomyr          |
| 18   | Ukraine | Youth expert          | Civil society organization       | Kropyvnytskyi     |
| 19   | Ukraine | Youth expert          | Civil society organization       | Kropyvnytskyi     |