

POLICY BRIEF

Harnessing Youth Agency for Peace and Security in the Horn of Africa

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American
Friends
Service
Committee



Abbreviations

AACC	All Africa Conference of Churches
AFSC	American Friends Service Committee
AU	African Union
CEPO	Community Empowerment for Progress Organization
HoA	Horn of Africa
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NUP	National Unity Platform
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SIPAD	Sustainable Initiative for Peace and Democracy
SOLO	Somali Lifeline Organization
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
YPS	Youth Peace Security

Executive Summary

The Horn of Africa (HoA), comprising Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda, continues to grapple with overlapping crises, including political instability, armed conflict, climate-induced displacement, and digital repression. Between 2022 and 2025, these challenges have intensified, undermining governance and social cohesion across the region. Yet, amid this fragility, youth who make up nearly 70% of the population are increasingly asserting themselves as agents of peace, accountability, and democratic renewal.

Despite their demographic significance, youth remain largely excluded from formal governance and peacebuilding processes. Often perceived as political tools or security risks, they face systemic marginalization, limited access to decision-making spaces, and shrinking civic freedoms. This exclusion has fueled frustration, protest movements, and, in some cases, vulnerability to radicalization. However, from all indications, there is a paradigm shift underway. Youth-led movements, most notably the Gen Z uprising in Kenya and sustained mobilizations in Uganda, have demonstrated the power of digital activism, grassroots organizing, and cross-border solidarity. Digital platforms such as TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, and Facebook have enabled decentralized forms of civic engagement, empowering youth to bypass traditional gatekeepers and amplify their voices across the region.

Introduction

The Horn of Africa is experiencing a convergence of political instability, climate-induced conflict, and shrinking civic space, with youth bearing the brunt of these crises despite comprising nearly 70% of the region's population. From Sudan's militarized power struggles to Ethiopia's fragile peace and Kenya's Gen Z-led protests, young people are increasingly asserting their agency through digital mobilization, grassroots peacebuilding, and civic activism. Yet, they remain largely excluded from formal decision-making and peace processes.

This policy brief draws on insights from the 2025 "Youth Lens Study," conducted under a joint initiative led by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) through its Salama Hub Program, in partnership with the All-Africa Conference of Churches (AACC). The initiative, titled "Transforming Lives through Evidence-Based Advocacy and Campaigning for Peaceful Change," is currently in its second phase (2024–2026). Its goal is to strengthen the capacity of civil society organizations and faith leaders in research, advocacy, and conflict analysis across the Horn of Africa. Youth are a key target group, and both CSOs and Faith Leaders actively engage with them to promote peace and stability in the region.

Drawing on regional data and insights from youth-led initiatives, the 2025 Youth Lens Study explores the underlying drivers of conflict, the fragility of peace processes, and the civic challenges confronting young people across the Horn of Africa. It highlights how youth are actively contributing to peacebuilding and civic engagement, often through digital platforms despite facing obstacles such as limited connectivity, online censorship, and the spread of misinformation. The brief calls on policymakers and regional actors to recognize youth as central partners in shaping inclusive governance and sustainable peace.

Conflict Dynamics and Youth Exclusion Across the Horn of Africa

Instability across the Horn of Africa is driven by a complex interplay of governance deficits, ethnic polarization, insurgencies, and climate-related shocks, with youth enduring the most of these crises. Exclusion, repression, and insecurity continue to constrain youth agency across the Horn of Africa. In Djibouti, youth unemployment, compounded by restricted civic space and digital limitations, fuels frustration, leading to massive emigration. Eritrean youth face systemic repression and indefinite conscription, with political organizing criminalized and thousands forced into exile. Ethiopia's post-Tigray fragility continues amid ethnic violence and surveillance, constraining youth-led peace efforts despite growing digital mobilization. Kenya's recurrent police violence and limited inclusion in formal governance have undermined youth participation; nonetheless, Generation Z has mobilized powerfully through digital activism, most notably the #RejectFinanceBill2024 movement. In Somalia, persistent insecurity and bureaucratic barriers hinder youth engagement, yet young people continue to drive peacebuilding through storytelling, dialogue, and local mediation. South Sudan youth remain marginalized in formal peace negotiations, but they have assumed leadership in trauma-healing and community reconciliation efforts. In Sudan, the militarized conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces, SAF, and Rapid Support Forces, RSF, has devastated youth prospects, displaced millions, and shrunk civic space; even so, youth have organized grassroots resistance and humanitarian solidarity networks despite violent repression. Uganda's restrictive laws, such as the Computer Misuse Act and pervasive state surveillance, suppress dissent, but young people persist in advancing accountability through satire, protest, and creative civic engagement.

These country-specific realities underscore the urgent need for inclusive policies that recognize youth as legitimate actors in shaping peace, governance, and regional stability.

Youth and the Burden of Conflict

Conflict across the Horn of Africa has had a profound and enduring impact on young people, who continue to experience the harshest consequences of instability. In countries such as South Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia, youth have been both victims and participants in armed violence, with many forcibly recruited into militias or national armies, while others have endured displacement, trauma, and the erosion of livelihoods. The Tigray conflict and ongoing unrest in Ethiopia's Amhara and Oromia regions have disrupted education and healthcare systems, leaving youth vulnerable and marginalized. In Somalia, extremist groups like Al-Shabaab continue to target young people for recruitment, particularly in underserved communities. Meanwhile, in Sudan, the militarized power struggle between SAF and RSF has devastated youth prospects, with grassroots resistance met by extreme violence and displacement. Across the region, civic space is shrinking, and digital repression is rising, further limiting youth freedom of expression and association.

Despite these challenges, youth are not merely victims; they are increasingly emerging as architects of peace. From mediating local disputes in South Sudan and Somalia to organizing civic education campaigns in Kenya and Uganda and developing digital early warning systems in Ethiopia and South Sudan, youth are actively contributing to conflict prevention and democratic renewal. However, their contributions remain undervalued, and their inclusion in formal peace processes is often tokenistic. Recognizing and investing in youth-led peacebuilding is essential to building sustainable peace and inclusive governance across the region.

Voices Amplified: Youth Mobilization in the Digital Age

Youth across the Horn of Africa are increasingly taking on influential roles in civic engagement and peacebuilding, often in contexts marked by limited political inclusion and socio-economic

challenges. Through grassroots organizing, creative expression, and the strategic use of digital platforms, young people are reshaping civic spaces and challenging long-standing power dynamics.

In Kenya, the 2024 protests against the Finance Bill highlighted the emergence of Generation Z as a driving force for civic accountability. These demonstrations were notably decentralized and leaderless, coordinated through social media platforms such as TikTok, Twitter/X, and WhatsApp. Hashtags like #RejectFinanceBill2024 and #OccupyParliament served as digital rallying points, enabling youth to mobilize across ethnic and regional lines. The movement marked a shift toward issue-based activism, with demands centered on transparency, economic justice, and inclusive governance.

In South Sudan, youth-led groups such as the Young Peace Builders Forum have been instrumental in advancing reconciliation and transitional justice. Operating in a politically constrained environment, these initiatives have facilitated intergenerational dialogue and civic education, contributing to community resilience. Support from organizations like Läkarmissionen - LM International and UNESCO has helped establish youth peace committees that foster trust and healing in conflict-affected regions.

In Somalia, young people have adopted innovative approaches to peacebuilding, leveraging informal networks and digital tools to mediate local disputes and promote social cohesion. Civil society organizations, including SIPAD and SOLO, have engaged youth through district-level councils, community radio programs, and WhatsApp-based early warning systems. These efforts have played a key role in countering extremist narratives and reducing stigma in post-conflict settings.

In Uganda, youth activism has taken on a creative and satirical form. Movements such as the Jobless Brotherhood have used symbolic acts like releasing painted pigs to protest corruption and draw public attention to governance failures. The National Unity Platform (NUP) has mobilized youth through digital campaigns such as Protest Vote Uganda 2026, engaging both domestic and diaspora communities in calls for democratic reform.

In Ethiopia, where civic space remains tightly controlled, youth have turned to encrypted messaging platforms like Telegram to foster dialogue and advocate for human rights. Campaigns such as #CrisisInEthiopia have amplified marginalized voices and attracted international attention to ongoing political tensions.

Digital platforms have become essential tools for youth activism across the region. They enable rapid communication, decentralized coordination, and the amplification of grassroots perspectives. These technologies empower young people to bypass conventional gatekeepers and engage directly in shaping public discourse.

However, digital engagement is not without risks. Challenges such as online harassment, misinformation, surveillance, and unequal access to internet services, particularly in rural and underserved areas, continue to hinder inclusive participation. Countries like Ethiopia, Uganda, and Sudan have seen increased restrictions on digital freedoms, underscoring the need for robust protections and digital literacy initiatives. Recognizing the transformative potential of youth-led digital activism, regional institutions such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have begun integrating youth into peace and security frameworks.

Through its Youth Peace and Security Strategy, IGAD supports media campaigns, innovation grants, and online peacebuilding efforts, aiming to harness the energy and creativity of young people to foster regional stability.

Youth in the Horn of Africa are redefining civic participation and peacebuilding through dynamic, tech-enabled activism. Their efforts are inclusive, resilient, and increasingly influential. Empowering youth as co-creators of democratic and peaceful societies is not only a matter of equity; it is a strategic imperative for the future stability and development of the Horn of Africa.

The Youth Struggle: Structural, Economic, and Social Obstacles to Participation

Young people in the Horn of Africa face a range of interlinked challenges that limit their ability to actively engage in peacebuilding, governance, and civic life. These barriers are rooted in structural, economic, political, and cultural systems that continue to marginalize youth voices.

Limited Access to Decision-Making Spaces:

Formal political and peace processes often exclude youth, leaving them underrepresented in institutions that shape national and regional policies. While structures such as National Youth Councils exist in many countries, they frequently operate with insufficient authority, funding, or political support, making it difficult for them to influence meaningful change or advance youth-focused agendas.

Economic Disempowerment: Widespread unemployment and underemployment among youth (often exceeding 60% in some parts of the region) contribute to economic instability and social vulnerability. Many young people lack access to decent work, financial services, or opportunities in emerging sectors such as green and digital economies. This economic marginalization not only limits their capacity to participate in civic life but also increases the risk of exploitation, including recruitment into armed groups or extremist movements.

Shrinking Civic Space: In most of the HoA countries, restrictive laws and administrative hurdles have made it increasingly difficult for youth-led organizations and civil society groups to operate freely. High registration fees, censorship, and surveillance discourage youth from organizing or expressing dissent. These constraints are particularly pronounced in countries such as Djibouti, Eritrea, and Uganda, where civic freedoms are tightly controlled.

Gender-Based Discrimination: Patriarchal structures and cultural expectations continue to limit the leadership opportunities available to young women. Female youth activists often encounter heightened risks such as harassment, violence, and exclusion from spaces where key decisions are made. Although they play vital roles in community development and peacebuilding, their efforts are frequently overlooked, and their contributions undervalued.

Fragmentation of Youth Representation: Youth advocacy efforts are often weakened by a lack of coordination among organizations and limited collaboration with older generations. This fragmentation hinders the development of unified strategies and reduces the overall impact of youth-led initiatives. Strengthening networks and fostering intergenerational partnerships are essential to building more cohesive and influential youth movements.

Addressing these barriers is essential not only for empowering youth but also for unlocking their potential as drivers of peace, innovation, and democratic renewal across the Horn of Africa.

Policy Recommendations

To strengthen youth participation in peacebuilding and governance across the Horn of Africa, coordinated action is needed from national governments, regional institutions, civil society, and international partners. The following offers a practical roadmap for inclusive and sustainable youth engagement.

National-Level Actions for National Governments, CSOs, and FBOs

Youth-inclusive peacebuilding in the HoA requires strong collaboration between governments and civil society. Governments play a critical role by driving policy and institutional reforms. Meanwhile, CSOs and FBOs contribute through their grassroots networks, community trust, and innovative approaches. These distinct yet complementary roles are essential to unlocking the full potential of youth as champions of peace, resilience, and democratic renewal.

Action Area	State Role	CSO/FBO Role
Formalize Youth Inclusion in Decision-Making	Legislate youth quotas in peace processes, governance, and constitutional reforms; establish and fund Youth Advisory Councils.	Advocate for youth inclusion; create and support youth platforms at local levels; monitor implementation of youth representation.
Empower Youth Institutions	Provide legal mandates, funding, and policy influence to National Youth Councils; align national strategies with regional frameworks.	Build capacity of youth institutions; facilitate policy dialogues; support alignment with AU and IGAD youth frameworks.
Protect Civic and Digital Freedoms	Repeal restrictive laws; enact digital protection legislation; safeguard freedom of expression and assembly.	Lead legal advocacy; provide digital safety training; document violations; support youth, especially women and marginalized groups.
Expand Economic Opportunities	Invest in youth-targeted programs in green/digital economies; create inclusive financing and vocational training schemes.	Implement livelihood and entrepreneurship programs; mobilize resources; partner with the private sector for youth economic empowerment.
Integrate Youth-Led Early Warning Systems	Institutionalize community-based alert systems into national peacebuilding and disaster response frameworks.	Pilot and scale digital alert systems; train youth in conflict mapping; advocate for integration into formal systems.
Promote Youth Participation in Elections	Support youth-centered civic education; include youth in electoral commissions and reform processes; protect youth voters.	Lead civic education and voter mobilization campaigns; facilitate youth dialogues with electoral bodies; monitor electoral processes.

Regional and International Engagement (AU, IGAD, EAC)

Implement Regional Youth Frameworks: The African Union's Continental Youth Peace and Security Framework and IGAD's Youth Strategy should be operationalized with dedicated budgets and measurable outcomes. Regular monitoring and reporting will ensure accountability and progress.

Support Cross-Border Youth Collaboration: Initiatives such as Peace Caravans and regional youth platforms can foster dialogue, learning, and solidarity across national boundaries, contributing to regional peacebuilding efforts.

Track Compliance with Global Commitments: Regional bodies and UN agencies should monitor how member states are implementing international resolutions such as UNSCR 2250, 2419, and 2535 that call for youth inclusion in peace and security processes.

Non-Governmental Organizations and Development Actors

Build Youth Capacity: Civil society organizations should expand training in areas such as mediation, trauma recovery, civic literacy, and digital advocacy. Organizations like SIPAD in Somalia and CEPO in South Sudan have shown how locally driven efforts can build peace and resilience.

Provide Flexible Funding and Mentorship: Development partners and NGOs should offer adaptable funding models and mentorship programs that support youth-led initiatives and allow for innovation and responsiveness to emerging needs.

Strengthen Youth-Led Research and Policy Input: Establishing youth research networks and evidence hubs can help inform policy decisions and ensure that youth perspectives are reflected in national and regional strategies.

Encourage Intergenerational Dialogue: Creating inclusive spaces for mentorship and collaboration between youth and older generations can foster mutual understanding and co-creation of solutions to complex challenges.

Conclusion and Call to Action

Young people across the Horn of Africa are not passive observers in the region's peace and governance landscape; they are active contributors, leading movements that challenge injustice, promote accountability, and build community resilience. Their engagement, often in the face of systemic exclusion and repression, underscores a critical truth: sustainable peace and democratic renewal cannot be achieved without the meaningful inclusion of youth.

From organizing decentralized protests to developing grassroots peace initiatives and leveraging digital platforms for advocacy, youth have demonstrated their capacity to lead transformative change. However, their efforts must be matched by structural reforms and sustained support from all sectors of society.

To fully harness the potential of youth as partners in peacebuilding, stakeholders must move beyond symbolic gestures and commit to concrete actions that embed youth agency at the heart of policy and practice. This includes:

- Institutionalizing youth representation in peace negotiations, governance bodies, and constitutional processes.
- Investing in youth futures through inclusive education, access to green and digital economies, and vocational training.
- Protecting civic and digital spaces, ensuring freedom of expression and safeguarding youth, especially young women, from harassment and surveillance.
- Supporting youth-led initiatives with flexible funding, mentorship, and platforms for collaboration and innovation.

Call to Action

Governments, Regional bodies such as the African Union and IGAD, civil society actors, and international development partners must work together to create an enabling environment where youth can thrive as leaders in peace and security. This includes:

- Operationalizing regional frameworks like the AU Continental Youth Peace and Security Framework and IGAD's Youth Strategy, with clear implementation plans and dedicated resources.
- Monitoring and supporting member states in fulfilling their obligations under UN Security Council Resolutions 2250, 2419, and 2535, which affirm the role of youth in peacebuilding.
- Facilitating cross-border youth exchanges and intergenerational dialogues to foster solidarity and shared learning.
- Prioritizing the inclusion of marginalized groups, particularly young women, in all aspects of peace and governance.

By embracing youth as equal partners, the Horn of Africa can transform its demographic dividend into a powerful force for peace, stability, and inclusive development. The time to act is now.

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About the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) promotes a world free of violence, inequality, and oppression. Guided by the Quaker belief in the divine light within each person, we nurture the seeds of change and respect for human life to fundamentally transform our societies and institutions. We work with people and partners worldwide of all faiths and backgrounds to meet urgent community needs, challenge injustice, and build peace. Through its Africa Regional Office in Kenya, AFSC promotes projects in Kenya, South Sudan, Somalia, Burundi, and Zimbabwe, with an evidence-based advocacy component for policy change in the Horn of Africa, with an office in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. AFSC has decades of experience leading advocacy, evidence-based research, and worldwide civil society strengthening programs. AFSC brings Global South leaders and Civil Society Organizations through the Dialogue and Exchange Program to learn and exchange ideas every year. Due to the challenging situation in the Horn of Africa, AFSC focused intensely on this region to link up with existing civil society networks and Faith Leaders to contribute with its specific expertise.

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About the All Africa Conference of Churches, AACC:

AACC (All Africa Conference of Churches) is a continental ecumenical body that accounts for over 200 million Christians across the African continent. AACC is the largest association of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, and Indigenous churches in Africa, and a member of the worldwide ecumenical network. As an ecumenical body, AACC is a fellowship of 214 members comprising Churches, National Christian Councils (NCCs), theological and lay training institutions, and other Christian organizations in 43 African countries. With eleven programmatic focus areas, AACC's current strategy ensures that churches and other Christian institutions in Africa significantly contribute to the realization of the Continental and Global sustainable development agendas, such as the 17 SDGs and the AU Agenda 2065: "The Africa We Want."

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