

# *FBA Research Report*

# **Research and Knowledge Review on Youth and DDR: Normatively Established, Operationally Nascent**

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The report is published and commissioned by the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) to identify research and knowledge gaps pertaining to the nexus of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) and youth, particularly through the lens of the Youth, Peace and Security agenda (YPS). It was written by Dr. Jacqui Cho whose biography can be found below. The report was edited by Anton Ingstedt, Agnes Torstensson, Mathilda Lindgren & Gabriella Berglund Valencia at FBA. The report is available at FBA's website on the link below.

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**Biography**

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**Photo**

FBA / Rodrigo Paras

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# 01 *Executive Summary*

The report examines the intersection between Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) and Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR), identifying key challenges, opportunities, and entry points for integrating youth-sensitive approaches into DDR processes. While the two fields of work have increasingly converged at the normative level, recognizing youth as agents of change and partners in peacebuilding, this recognition has yet to be consistently translated into the design and implementation of DDR processes.

Drawing on academic, policy, and practice-oriented research, as well as practitioner interviews, the report identifies several major challenges. **At a foundational level, definitional inconsistencies around “youth” complicate targeting and programme design**, as age-based categories often fail to reflect context-specific understandings shaped by social, economic, and cultural markers. At the same time, youth are frequently treated as a homogeneous group, obscuring differences across gender, life trajectories, and pathways of mobilization and disengagement, often leading to the marginalization of particularly young women.

**Across contexts, youth participation also remains limited and often tokenistic, with involvement largely confined to implementation.** Gatekeeping by traditional authorities and institutional pressures to prioritize “low-risk” beneficiaries further exclude the most vulnerable and risk reinforcing “youth-washing.” These dynamics are reinforced by a broader tendency towards economic reductionism, where reintegration focuses on livelihoods at the expense of political, social, and psychosocial dimensions. Such gaps are particularly evident in social reintegration and identity transformation, which are insufficiently addressed by standardized programming and under-resourced psychosocial support. Similarly, the “grey zone” population, individuals mobilized as children but demobilized as adults, continues to fall between child protection and adult DDR frameworks. Finally, the report identifies an important and under-documented challenge: mutual (mis)perceptions between DDR and YPS communities. Emerging consistently across interviews, these awareness gaps shape how each field interprets and operationalizes the other, limiting practical entry points for integration.

**At the same time, the report underscores that young people are not only affected by these challenges but are actively responding to them.** It highlights how youth are already facilitating disengagement, sustaining informal reintegration networks, and contributing to community-level reconciliation, often outside formal DDR structures. These contributions stress the importance of moving beyond viewing youth as beneficiaries to recognizing them as legitimate political and social actors.

The report concludes by outlining targeted implications for DDR and YPS practitioners, youth actors and networks, donors, and researchers. These aim to operationalize the insights generated throughout the analysis, supporting a shift from normative alignment to practical implementation. In addition to proposing an adaptive approach to develop context-sensitive and DDR-appropriate understandings of “youth”, it highlights a broader set of opportunities to strengthen youth-sensitive DDR in practice.

**For DDR practitioners,** the report highlights the need to embed meaningful participation of young people across all stages of DDR processes, including inception and M&E phases. It also calls for moving beyond economic reductionism by integrating political inclusion, social reintegration, and support for identity in transition, alongside more tailored psychosocial approaches. Empowering civil society organizations (CSOs) that are already adopting individualized case management and referral systems, as well as operationalizing “dual-age” intake to identify the high-risk “grey zone” demographic, could help support diverse youth trajectories.

**For YPS practitioners,** the report underscores the need to translate normative commitments into operational practice by better documenting and demonstrating the added value of youth inclusion for both young people and broader community dynamics. YPS practitioners could also leverage joint trainings and case-based simulations to showcase how YPS is already functioning beyond a purely normative framework and suggest concrete entry points within DDR processes. The report also highlights how adaptive, conflict-sensitive framing may facilitate greater community buy-in to YPS-inspired initiatives.

**For youth actors and networks,** the report emphasizes their role in prevention and disengagement through leveraging informal networks and spaces. It further stresses the importance of engaging with harder-to-reach youth to facilitate meaningful inclusion and mitigate risks of tokenism. Further, it proposes to maintain and expand youth-led physical spaces that play key roles in identity transformation and strengthening alternative forms of belonging.

**For donors,** the report points to their central role in incentivizing meaningful youth inclusion by requiring participatory programme design, resourcing youth engagement, and shifting towards longer-term and qualitative indicators of reintegration. It also highlights the need to avoid reinforcing “youth-washing” by ensuring the inclusion of harder-to-reach and higher-risk youth.

**For researchers,** the report calls for participatory approaches by both hiring youth-as-researchers and adopting youth-led methodologies in data collection and M&E. It also underscores opportunities offered by snowball sampling and peer group, as opposed to focus group, interviews to avoid elite capture and reach “invisible” populations. Finally, it encourages researchers to align research with operational learning priorities, such as the formal-informality dilemma, roles of youth networks, supporting identities in transition, and dynamics shaping (re)mobilization in active conflicts.

# 02 *Introduction to Youth and DDR: Normatively Established, Operationally Nascent*

In the past decade, international peace and security policy has undergone significant normative changes in how it understands the role of young people in conflict-affected contexts. The adoption of the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda via the UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015) marked a decisive shift away from viewing youth primarily as security risks to be managed, towards recognizing young men and women as political agents and partners for peacebuilding.<sup>1</sup> In parallel, Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) interventions have evolved from rigid, narrow programmes into a more flexible set of processes – incorporating DDR programmes, DDR-related tools, and reintegration support – that could be deployed across the peace continuum, including in contexts of ongoing violence and even in the absence of peace agreements. The DDR field is also increasingly embracing community-based reintegration (CBR) approaches that recognize the need to empower the receiving communities alongside supporting individual ex-combatants.<sup>2</sup>

At the normative level, the linkages between youth and DDR are increasingly established. The YPS agenda explicitly identifies *Disengagement and Reintegration* as one of its five core pillars, alongside *Participation, Protection, Prevention, and Partnerships*.<sup>3</sup> A similar commitment is outlined in the 2019 revision of the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS), specifically within its module on *Youth and DDR* which recognizes youth as “a force of positive change” and emphasizes their political agency.<sup>4</sup> Together, these developments signal a renewed interest in moving beyond treating youth merely as a distinct DDR caseload and passive beneficiaries, towards engaging them as partners and agents of change.

It is critical to recognize that this shift is not merely a normative aspiration; young people are already making significant, often undocumented, contributions to reintegration and prevention work. This report highlights these efforts, ranging from peer-led disengagement to community-level reconciliation, and showcases concrete opportunities to further strengthen and draw inspiration from these initiatives. Also central to the analysis is a broader conceptual shift to move beyond seeing youth primarily as beneficiaries towards understanding young people as active political and social actors within DDR processes. By foregrounding youth agency, the report highlights how young people could be further empowered to act as legitimate stakeholders in their communities.

1 United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250, S/RES/2250 (2015) (UN Security Council, 2015).

2 United Nations, 4.30 *Reintegration*, Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (United Nations, 2023); Elman Peace et al., *Guidance Note on Supporting Community-Based Reintegration of Former Members of Armed Forces and Groups* (UNDP, 2024).

3 United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250.

4 United Nations, 5.30 *Youth and DDR*, Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (United Nations, 2021), 1.

Leveraging these existing contributions continues to be a challenge, as there remains a stark disconnect between normative ambition and operational practice. While youth are increasingly recognized within peace and security frameworks, the integration of youth-sensitive approaches into formal DDR planning, design, development, implementation, and evaluation continues to be uneven and underdeveloped. Interviews with DDR and YPS experts at both policy and practice levels underscore the persistent struggles of bridging policy with practice, even when there are theoretical synergies between the two streams of work.

Among DDR practitioners who do not specialize in youth programming, YPS tends to be perceived as a normative agenda that is difficult to reconcile with the technical, security-oriented demands of DDR. This is in spite of the ways that YPS has evolved beyond a purely normative framework and increasingly functions as an analytical and operational approach used by different actors. At the same time, YPS experts often lack in-depth knowledge of different DDR processes, leading to difficulties in determining which types and stages of DDR processes may lend themselves as appropriate entry points for YPS perspectives. Such a discrepancy in perceptions is also reflected in how the *Disengagement and Reintegration* pillar is often seen to “lack dedicated operational guidance, safeguards, and financing pathways comparable to other pillars.”<sup>5</sup> Addressing this disconnect is timely, given that DDR processes often take place in contexts where most combatants are young men and women.<sup>6</sup>

This report is part of an FBA-led process to explore the interlinkages between DDR and youth to make future DDR initiatives both more relevant to young persons and better leverage the progress of youth as peacebuilders. Bringing together academic, policy and practice-oriented research, as well as practitioner interviews,<sup>7</sup> the main body of the report identifies key challenges in developing youth-sensitive DDR processes and in turn suggests opportunities and entry points to bring about more meaningful convergence between YPS and DDR. Then, building on the challenges and opportunities, the report ends by outlining forward-looking outputs to guide future stages of the process. This includes suggesting concepts of youth that are DDR-appropriate, and outlining targeted implications for relevant stakeholders, notably DDR practitioners, YPS practitioners, donors, and researchers.

5 Yosuke Nagai, *The Missing Pillar: Re-Centering Disengagement and Reintegration in the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda for a More Innovative Approach to Sustaining Peace*, Independent Thematic Papers for the Second Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security in 2026 (2026), 4.

6 Graeme Simpson, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Report on Youth, Peace and Security* (UNFPA and PBSO, 2018), 106; *Concept Note - DDR and Youth: A Practitioner's Guide on How to Include Youth in DDR and Other Security Transitions in a Meaningful Way*, Concept Note (Folke Bernadotte Academy and Cairo International Center for Conflict Resolution, Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding, 2023).

7 The review draws on five semi-structured interviews with FBA partners working in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Mozambique, and Somalia (civil society actors), as well as representatives from the UN, and an International Training Center in Egypt, in addition to two group interviews with FBA Working Groups on DDR and YPS. These were conducted in January and February 2026.

# 03 *Review of Key Challenges, Opportunities and Entry Points*

## A) DEFINITION & CONFLATION CHALLENGES

Youth is primarily defined through an age-based perspective in the international policy sphere, yet age thresholds vary significantly across frameworks. The YPS agenda, as articulated in the UN Security Council Resolution 2250, defines youth as individuals between 18 and 29, while the IDDRS adopt a narrower range of 15–24. In age-sensitive DDR programming, this is at times further disaggregated into so-called “child youth” (15–17) and “adult youth” (18–24), with the latter group overlapping with YPS framework’s understanding of youth.<sup>8</sup> The World Bank sets a younger bar, as those between 12 and 24 years. Regional organizations, as well as many countries, also maintain their own definitions; the African Youth Charter, for example, defines youth as individuals aged from 18 and 35. This lack of consensus creates initial challenges in identifying and quantifying the target population<sup>9</sup> and sometimes lead to tensions between actors – i.e. international organizations and states – as to the age range that should be used for programmes targeted for youth.<sup>10</sup>

While such age-based categorizations may be necessary for operational and legal purposes, it is increasingly clear that the biological age approach alone fails to align with local cultural definitions of youth and adulthood.<sup>11</sup> In many DDR contexts, youth is understood less as a fixed age bracket but more as the life phase between childhood and adulthood, with cultural understandings of life cycles playing a critical role in deciding who remains a youth and who becomes an adult. Across different settings, transitions to adulthood are often shaped by social markers such as marriage, economic independence, or parenthood, rather than chronological age alone.<sup>12</sup> Where these markers are delayed, often due to economic constraints, insecurity, or social expectations, individuals remain in prolonged periods of “waithood” well beyond standardized age categories.<sup>13</sup> These transitions are also frequently gendered, with differing expectations placed on young women and men regarding what

8 Folke Bernadotte Academy, “Gender and Youth Perspectives in DDR,” Stockholm, September 3, 2025.

9 FBA and CCCPA, “YPS Programming,” *DDR and Youth: a practitioner’s guide on how to include youth in DDR and other Security Transitions in a meaningful way*, October 12, 2023.

10 Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026.

11 FBA and CCCPA, “Introduction to the YPS Agenda,” *DDR and Youth: a practitioner’s guide on how to include youth in DDR and other Security Transitions in a meaningful way*, October 9, 2023; Brock Bersaglio et al., “Youth under Construction: The United Nations’ Representations of Youth in the Global Conversation on the Post-2015 Development Agenda,” *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue Canadienne d’études Du Développement* 36, no. 1 (2015): 57–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2015.994596>.

12 See, for example, Steven K. Morelli, “The Importance of Educational and Mental Health Support in Youth DDR Operations” (Monograph, US Army Command and General Staff College, 2019); Marisa O. Ensor, ed., *Securitizing Youth: Young People’s Roles in the Global Peace and Security Agenda* (Rutgers University Press, 2021), 184, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2v55hp9>.

13 Marc Sommers, *The Outcast Majority* (University of Georgia Press, 2015), 12.

constitutes adulthood.<sup>14</sup> While practitioners note that the idea of “age-sensitive” DDR is increasingly adopted across contexts,<sup>15</sup> arbitrary age ranges often do not correspond with context-specific understandings of youth; in these cases, if a strict age range of international policy frameworks is enforced, this could lead to skewed programming that does not make sense in practice and fails to achieve the intended outcomes.<sup>16</sup> A CSO working with young people in eastern DRC, for example, reports repeated tensions from donors rejecting local communities’ understandings of youth that frequently include older ages who face similar vulnerabilities and risks of recruitment, which ultimately undermine community trust and buy-in into the program.<sup>17</sup>

An additional challenge lies in the prevalent conflation of youth with other demographic categories – most notably children and women, but also persons with disabilities – within peace and security practice. While driven by practical reasons such as limited timing and resources or pragmatic intentions of including traditionally excluded groups,<sup>18</sup> such conflation carries significant consequences for youth-sensitive DDR. Conflating youth with children, for example, risks obscuring the distinct needs and positionality of individuals mobilized as children but demobilized as adults (*elaborated in part 3.F*), as well as undermining the agency of the youth demographic.<sup>19</sup> Youth are also frequently “lumped together” with women, another historically marginalized demographic from DDR; yet their conflation, such as speaking of youth and gender-sensitive analysis and programming in one grouping, not only underplays their specific needs, but also renders young women and their specificities invisible (*elaborated in 3.B*).<sup>20</sup>

## Opportunities and Entry Points

**Participatory Definition of Youth:** Prioritizing youth participation in the design stage of a DDR initiative to identify relevant social, cultural, and economic markers that define youth in their specific realities would help ensure that programming aligns with context-appropriate definitions of youthhood. Recent YPS handbooks emphasize the positive potential of mandating, training, and equipping youth to conduct the research themselves, rather than external experts defining the demographic.<sup>21</sup> These approaches could draw on emerging guidance and lessons learned on participatory programming and research with youth, which outlines concrete suggestions that leads to a sense of empowerment and in turn active

14 Simpson, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Report on Youth, Peace and Security*, 11.

15 Interview, FBA Working Group on YPS, January 2026.

16 Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026.

17 Interview, CSO, DRC, February 2026.

18 Interview, FBA Working Group on YPS, January 2026.

19 Jacqui Cho, “A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy? Constructions of Youth-as-Troublemakers in UN DDR Processes,” *Security Dialogue* 55, no. 3 (2024): 278, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09670106231220117>.

20 FBA and CCCPA, “Connecting the WPS Agenda and the YPS Agenda,” *DDR and Youth: a practitioner’s guide on how to include youth in DDR and other Security Transitions in a meaningful way*, October 9, 2023; FBA and CCCPA, “Conflict Analysis,” *DDR and Youth: a practitioner’s guide on how to include youth in DDR and other Security Transitions in a meaningful way*, October 10, 2023.

21 United Nations and Folke Bernadotte Academy, *Youth, Peace and Security: A Programming Handbook* (UNFPA, UNDP, DPPA/PBSO, FBA, 2021); Erike Tanghøj and João Felipe Scarpelini, *Youth, Peace and Security Adviser’s Handbook* (Folke Bernadotte Academy, 2020).

involvement of youth.<sup>22</sup> If time and resource constraints make this infeasible, youth should, at the minimum, participate in validation exercises to ensure that their perspectives are accurately embedded.<sup>23</sup> The need for flexibility in age-based definitions of youth, in ways that incorporate widespread community perspectives, has been stressed across different contexts.<sup>24</sup>

**Context-Sensitive Screening Criteria:** Second, during the screening process, instead of screening solely by birth year, DDR practitioners could incorporate the identified social, cultural and economic markers into vulnerability assessments in order to identify young persons who, despite legal adulthood, may benefit from youth-sensitive support.<sup>25</sup> Depending on culture, gender and context, these markers may include marital status – and childbearing especially for women – housing independence, and economic independence. With this approach, a 30-year-old who meets such dependency criteria could be considered eligible for youth-sensitive programming, ensuring that vulnerability rather than age alone determines access to vocational training and mentorship support. Experiences indicate that capturing context-specific understandings of, and challenges faced by, youth and designing programmes for beneficiaries with a similar need, even if their ages may vary, is critical for a youth-targeted initiative to bring about their intended outcome and ensure community buy-in.<sup>26</sup>

## B) STEREOTYPES, INSTRUMENTALIZATION, AND FORGOTTEN YOUNG WOMEN

In the peace and security sector, not limited to DDR, “youth” frequently tends to be used as a synonym for young men, perceived primarily as a threat, while “gender” is treated as a synonym for “adult women”, perceived as victims.<sup>27</sup> Such gender stereotypes have the dual effects of further stigmatizing young men as troublemakers regardless of their actual behavior,<sup>28</sup> while at the same time rendering young women invisible and without agency. In fact, according to UN Women, “young women disappear when it comes to theories on youth and violence” which in turn means that their reasons for joining armed groups are under-studied.<sup>29</sup> This narrative ignores the reality that in many contexts, youth are already serving as frontline mediators and peacebuilding actors, leveraging their unique access to informal networks to facilitate disengagement and prevent recruitment long before formal programs are established.

- 22 Siobhan O’Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, *No Research About Us Without Us: Policy Memo: Participatory Policy-Oriented Research with Children and Youth Affected by Conflict* (United Nations University, 2019); Kato Van Broeckhoven et al., *Picturing Conflict: Child Perspectives From Their Time With Boko Haram and Their Exit Journeys*, November 18, 2024.
- 23 Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026; United Nations and Folke Bernadotte Academy, *Youth, Peace and Security: A Programming Handbook*, 72.
- 24 Interview, CSO, Somalia, February 2026; Interview, CSO, Mozambique, February 2026; Interview, CSO, DRC, February 2026.
- 25 Nagai, *The Missing Pillar: Re-Centering Disengagement and Reintegration in the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda for a More Innovative Approach to Sustaining Peace*, 7.
- 26 Interview, CSO, DRC, February 2026; Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026.
- 27 Sommers, *The Outcast Majority; UN Women, Young Women in Peace and Security at the Intersection of the YPS and WPS Agendas* (UN Women, 2018); Interview, INGO, Egypt, January 2026.
- 28 Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026.
- 29 UN Women, *Young Women in Peace and Security at the Intersection of the YPS and WPS Agendas*, 4.

*Young men:* Although the youth bulge theory has been heavily criticized and debunked both in academic and policy scholarship,<sup>30</sup> this narrative remains influential in many contexts where DDR initiatives occur.<sup>31</sup> When young men are primarily viewed through a security lens as threats and troublemakers, interventions risk focusing heavily on short-term, economic pacification rather than political or social inclusion.<sup>32</sup> This is problematic in that it can create perverse incentives where certain young men engaged in disruptive behavior to qualify for these economic benefits,<sup>33</sup> and it also risks failing to address the root causes of young persons' mobilization into conflict.

This is linked to another challenge of instrumentalization of the YPS agenda to secure resources where references to youth are prominent on paper but excluded from reality. There is growing evidence of “youth-washing” – the strategic use of youth as a category for publicity and fundraising – from international actors who utilize and in turn reinforce the youth-as-threat narrative to tap into counterterrorism (and preventing/countering violent extremism, P/CVE) funding streams.<sup>34</sup> In a community violence reduction (CVR) project in the Central African Republic (CAR), for example, funding was secured by highlighting “at-risk youth” on project proposals, whereas during the implementation, the project largely excluded high-risk and harder-to-access youth and engaged other more easily accessible groups.<sup>35</sup> Experiences suggest that this phenomenon is not unique to CAR but is seen across other contexts.<sup>36</sup>

*Young women:* Young women leaving armed groups face a “double discrimination” based on both age and gender and risk falling into a programmatic void: they are often excluded from youth programs that target so-called dangerous young men and women/gender programs that target older, established women.<sup>37</sup> Young women also face greater barriers in accessing formal DDR programs because of the difficulty of proving “combatant” status that in some cases is required to benefit from DDR, as they more frequently serve in non-combatant functions or were forcibly married to combatants.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, young women also tend to self-demobilize more frequently than their male peers due to the intense stigma and long-term discrimination that they may face should their history as part of armed groups be known in communities. Greater care burden, especially for young mothers, and limited access to

30 See, for example, Lesley Pruitt, “Rethinking Youth Bulge Theory in Policy and Scholarship: Incorporating Critical Gender Analysis,” *International Affairs* 96, no. 3 (2020): 711–28, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaaa012>; United Nations and Folke Bernadotte Academy, *Youth, Peace and Security: A Programming Handbook*, 28.

31 Interview, CSO, Mozambique, February 2026; Interview, CSO, Somalia, February 2026; FBA and CCCPA, “Introduction to the YPS Agenda.”

32 Jareme R. McMullin et al., “Good Ones and Bad Ones: Gendered Distortions and Aspirations in Research with Conflict-Affected Youth in Liberia,” *Peacebuilding* 12, no. 4 (2024): 575–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2024.2385210>.

33 Cho, “A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?”

34 Siobhán McEvoy-Levy, “Youth and Peacebuilding,” in *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2024).

35 Cho, “A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?”, 286.

36 Interview, UNIDIR, Headquarters, February 2026.

37 UN Women, *Young Women in Peace and Security at the Intersection of the YPS and WPS Agendas*, 8.

38 O’Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*, 85.

information adds to their logistical challenges.<sup>39</sup> In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for example, young women and girls were estimated to constitute around 40 percent of the total number of the age demographic released from armed groups, but only made up less than 10% of children who went through formal DDR processes.<sup>40</sup> Adding to programming difficulties, the prevalence of self-demobilization means that data on young women is particularly scarce. Furthermore, even for those who enter DDR processes, vocational training has been said to reinforce gender stereotypes – for example, sewing for girls – ignoring and reversing the non-traditional roles and agency women may have exercised during the conflict.<sup>41</sup>

The issue of forced marriages further complicates the situation, with some young women wishing to remain married to the fighters while others do not.<sup>42</sup> This creates a set of difficult programmatic and ethical dilemmas for DDR actors: interventions must navigate tensions between protection and agency, particularly where relationships may involve elements of coercion but are also socially and economically significant to the individual. It also complicates reintegration pathways, as support needs differ significantly between those seeking separation and those choosing to remain, making standardized programming inadequate. More broadly, these dynamics highlight the need for more flexible, individualized, and gender-responsive DDR approaches that can account for diverse trajectories.

## Opportunities and Entry Points

**Youth-led Conflict Analysis:** Conducting youth-led conflict analysis can be a particularly helpful entry point to overcome harmful stereotypes. Instead of simply consulting youth in the process, which can become akin to “idea mining” and lead to fatigue among youth,<sup>43</sup> allocating resources and employing young people to participate in actor mapping would not only enable greater access to hard-to-reach populations but can also importantly challenge the victim/perpetrator binary by positioning youth as experts with deep contextual knowledge.<sup>44</sup> Such efforts require identifying and building trusted partnerships with youth-led actors, both to strengthen existing initiatives and to collaborate with them as equal counterparts in analysis and programme design. This collaboration and delegation of responsibility would likely lead to a deeper and more disaggregated understanding of why youth mobilize.<sup>45</sup>

39 FBA and CCCPA, “Gender and Age Responsive Analysis for CBRR Programming,” *DDR and Youth: a practitioner’s guide on how to include youth in DDR and other Security Transitions in a meaningful way*, October 11, 2023; FBA and CCCPA, “Connecting the WPS Agenda and the YPS Agenda”; UN Women, *Young Women in Peace and Security at the Intersection of the YPS and WPS Agendas*, 18.

40 O’Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*, 89.

41 Elman Peace et al., *Guidance Note on Supporting Community-Based Reintegration of Former Members of Armed Forces and Groups*, 8.

42 Interview, UNIDIR, Headquarters, February 2026.

43 Interview, CSO, Somalia, February 2026.

44 Interview, CSO, DRC, February 2026. United Nations and Folke Bernadotte Academy, *Youth, Peace and Security: A Programming Handbook*, 29–30; Interview, CSO, Somalia, February 2026.

45 Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026; FBA and CCCPA, “Profiling of Target Groups: Reasons to Join Armed Groups,” *DDR and Youth: a practitioner’s guide on how to include youth in DDR and other Security Transitions in a meaningful way*, October 11, 2023.

**Strategic, Multi-Actor Narrative Building:** To further contribute to debunking harmful stereotypes of both young men and women that undermine combatant-community relations, DDR practitioners could also engage in strategic public information campaigns that explicitly highlight youth as peacebuilders. Drawing on their existing partnerships, they could, for example, showcase and amplify stories of youth, including ex-combatants, leading community reconstruction and engaging in intercommunal mediation, shifting the public perception from fear to acceptance.<sup>46</sup>

These strategic campaigns can be further strengthened by leveraging the unique role that young people play in the prevention of recruitment and facilitating disengagement.<sup>47</sup> Across different contexts, youth networks play a crucial role in preventing the spread of rumors on social media that fuel recruitment, using their connections to “fact-check” and disseminate corrected information. In Northern Mozambique, young religious leaders (imams) have utilized their access to informal youth networks – such as fishing or gaming groups – to vet job offers to ensure they are not traps by insurgents and provide “counter-narratives” to extremism.<sup>48</sup> A similar initiative has been implemented in eastern DRC where influential youth are equipped with trainings to become “peace ambassadors” who are then encouraged to leverage their pre-existing relationships with other young people who may have joined armed groups to return to their families and communities.<sup>49</sup>

This intersection between DDR and P/CVE demonstrates that youth-led mechanisms can be more persuasive than top-down messaging, as messages encouraging exit are often more effective when coming from influential peers rather than elders or external entities.<sup>50</sup> For instance, programs like “Salam Shabab” in Iraq illustrate how seeing peers in peacebuilding roles can inspire other youth to adopt similar roles, reducing the “pull” factors of recruitment.<sup>51</sup> Exploring these intersections and the general contribution of young people in recruitment prevention offers DDR practitioners new insights and inspiration for the design of more youth-sensitive reintegration support that addresses the specific political and social drivers of mobilization.

**Reintegration Pathways for Young Women:** Finally, several DDR-related tools and reintegration support modalities, such as CVR and CBR, offer a more flexible approach to include young women who may have greater difficulty in entering formal DDR programs due to a lack of recognized ex-combatant status and risk of stigma. As CVR’s criteria officially includes

46 Interview, CSO, Somalia, February 2026; Global Coalition on Youth, Peace, and Security, *Implementing the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda at Country-Level: A Guide for Public Officials* (Office of the UN Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth, 2022), 15.

47 Nagai and Harper, *Youth Associated with Non-State Armed Groups: Building an Evidence Base on Disengagement Pathways and Reintegration Challenges*.

48 Interview, CSO, Mozambique, February 2026.

49 Interview, CSO, DRC, February 2026.

50 O’Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*.

51 Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development Working Group on Youth and Peacebuilding, *Young People’s Participation in Peacebuilding: A Practice Note* (Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development Working Group on Youth and Peacebuilding, 2016), 52.

both combatants and other members of the community, notably youth, this allows for the inclusion of young women. The IDDRS stress the need to create safe spaces, such as through female-specific desks at demobilization sites staffed by women, where women can register confidentially to avoid community stigma and receive gender-specific legal assistance.<sup>52</sup>

Once young women disarm and demobilize through the official process, further attention should be paid to meet their specific needs in the reintegration phase. While armed groups often challenge traditional gender roles, the post-conflict phase frequently see women pushed back into traditional gender roles constrained to the domestic realm.<sup>53</sup> This neglects the sense of emancipation that young women may have experienced in armed groups and leads to a mismatch particularly when they are offered women-specific livelihood support and skills training.

**Lessons on Gender-Responsive Reintegration from Colombia:** In fact, in the case of Colombia, the types of support provided for women is said to have contributed to women's intense battle with gender expectations in the post-conflict period.<sup>54</sup> Research shows that women ex-combatants in Colombia have developed a political identity known as "insurgent feminism."<sup>55</sup> Reintegration programs could build on this by formalizing women's wartime skills and status into civilian leadership, rather than relegating them to stereotypical roles like tailoring or cooking. At the same time, DDR practitioners could strengthen the potentially pre-existing "more equal and caring 'insurgent masculinities'" in armed groups, as was the case in the FARC, and help maintain more egalitarian gender roles of the conflict period.<sup>56</sup> This is also relevant in the programming towards young persons who became parents during the conflict. Instead of assuming that women's role as the sole caregiver, DDR practitioners could design reintegration support that facilitates shared caregiving responsibilities. Depending on the context, this could include adequate childcare facilities in reintegration areas that would allow young mothers to take on full-time jobs and leadership roles, as well as the options for young fathers to assume non-mobile jobs that do not require them to travel constantly, as was the case for many ex-FARC members in Colombia.<sup>57</sup>

**Integrating YPS and WPS Lenses:** While there are risks to lumping together YPS and Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agendas, productively combining the two frameworks could shed light on the experiences and needs of young women, who often fall through the cracks in both

52 United Nations, 5.30 *Youth and DDR*, 10.

53 Sanne Weber, *Gender and Citizenship in Transitional Justice: Everyday Experiences of Reparation and Reintegration in Colombia* (Bristol University Press, 2023).

54 Ashley Ehasz, "Political Reincorporation of Female FARC-EP Ex-Combatants: The Creation of Victims, Heroes, and Threats," *Cornell International Affairs Review* 13 (June 2020): 39–93, <https://doi.org/10.37513/ciar.v13i2.553>.

55 Priscyll Ancil Avoine, *Farianas' Insurgent Feminism: For a Militant, Affective and Embodied Reincorporation in Colombia*, *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, September 9, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1332/25151088Y2024D000000054>.

56 Priscyll Ancil Avoine and Sanne Weber, "Where Are the Fathers? Reincorporation, Family Relations and Gendered Parenthood in Colombia," *International Peacekeeping* 32, no. 4 (2025): 19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2025.2490670>.

57 Avoine and Weber, "Where Are the Fathers?"

YPS and WPS programming. In fact, practitioners noted that when gender and youth are discussed together in settings such as course trainings, partly due to timing constraints, this sometimes facilitates fruitful conversations around intersectional programming.<sup>58</sup> These moments could be further leveraged as the value in combining these frameworks lie in ensuring the visibility of gender differences within the YPS agenda, and in ensuring the age differences within the WPS agenda.

***Donor Incentives to Prevent “Youth-Washing”:*** Finally, an important entry point for avoiding “youth-washing” lies with donors, who hold what one interviewee described as the “number one leverage point” in shaping how many reintegration programmes are designed and evaluated.<sup>59</sup> If meaningful youth inclusion and participation is not required as a core funding condition, it risks remaining a “nice to have” or last-minute addition rather than a substantive component.<sup>60</sup> Donors could counter this by requiring contribution proposals and donor reporting to document how programmes worked to ensure young people’s voices inform its design and implementation.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, donors could also require a certain percentage of contributions to be specifically allocated for participatory work, such as pre-programme assessment and design, to ensure it is not just a tokenistic add-on.<sup>62</sup> At an evaluation stage, this also requires moving beyond immediate economic-related outputs towards indicators of sustained reintegration, such as reduced ties to armed groups or risks of recidivism, not just, for example, the number of people who received vocational training.<sup>63</sup>

### C) MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION OF YOUTH: BEYOND ELITE CAPTURE AND TOKENISM

*Who?* While the YPS agenda emphasizes participation, practical DDR interventions often struggle to move beyond tokenistic consultation to meaningful power-sharing. One source of challenge may be cultural; in many gerontocratic societies, youth participation is culturally resisted. Elders and political elites often act as gatekeepers, selecting elite or compliant youth to represent the demographic, excluding the most marginalized or radicalized youth.<sup>64</sup> In Somalia, for example, a proposal to include youth in programming faced resistance from elders who did not view young people, particularly those considered “troublemakers”, as legitimate actors who should be consulted.<sup>65</sup> Similarly in Cameroon, national authorities did not expect –

58 Interview, FBA Working Group on YPS, January 2026.

59 Interview, UNIDIR, Headquarters, February 2026.

60 Interview, CSO, Somalia, February 2026; Interview, UNIDIR, Headquarters, February 2026.

61 Tanghøj and Scarpelini, *Youth, Peace and Security Adviser’s Handbook*, 50.

62 O’Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *No Research About Us Without Us: Policy Memo: Participatory Policy-Oriented Research with Children and Youth Affected by Conflict*, 7.

63 Interview, UNIDIR, Headquarters, February 2026.

64 Marc Sommers, in *The Outcast Majority and Postwar Development: Youth Exclusion and the Pressure for Success* (2017), 234.

65 Lilla Schumicky-Logan, “What Is Left for the Youth At-Risk? Honouring Local Peace Dividends, Rehabilitation and Integration through the Relational Sensibility Approach. An Analysis of Reintegration Approaches and Their Effectiveness on Youth at-Risk of Criminalisation – a Somalia Case Study” (PhD Thesis, University of Bradford, 2018), 297, <http://hdl.handle.net/10454/19415>.

or necessarily desired – political agency on the part of youth ex-fighters, adding further difficulties to meaningful youth inclusion.<sup>66</sup>

This also partly explains why CBR experiences vary in their youth-inclusivity, as these approaches largely depend on existing community structures that may be heavily controlled by elders.<sup>67</sup> That DDR implementing agencies are under high pressure to demonstrate quick success heightens the problematic incentive to target “well-adjusted” youth who are easier to reach, more educated, and more likely to succeed in training programs, rather than the higher-risk youth – often rural and less educated – who are difficult to reach and manage, but most in need of DDR support.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, selection processes for youth to both participate in designing programmes, as well as being beneficiaries of implementation, are often undermined by nepotism that shape access to programs.<sup>69</sup>

*When?* Even when youth are included, participation is often limited to the implementation phase rather than in the design and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) stages.<sup>70</sup> This reduces youth to passive recipients or labourers, rather than political agents capable of contributing to peace. That young people are rarely involved in the inception phase, such as conflict analysis and theory of change development, risks programs being based on flawed assumptions about youth.<sup>71</sup> Even when youth are included in decision-making spaces, in many cases, they have often been treated as “wallflowers” or as those invited to “tick a box”.<sup>72</sup> Then, calling a process “participatory” when youth are merely consulted without influence on the actual definitions or decisions leads to tokenism.<sup>73</sup>

## Opportunities and Entry Points

The three-lens approach of YPS stresses the importance of viewing youth not primarily as *beneficiaries* but also as *partners* and *leaders*.<sup>74</sup>

***Who? Inclusive Beneficiary Selection:*** To incorporate meaningful youth participation in DDR first as beneficiaries, practitioners could actively counter gatekeeping and elite capture by bypassing, or limiting the influence of, traditional gatekeepers (i.e. chiefs, party officials) during the beneficiary selection phase. To minimize political favouritism, policy guidance

66 Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026.

67 FBA and CCCPA, “DDR Conceptual Framework and DDR Related Tools,” *DDR and Youth: a practitioner’s guide on how to include youth in DDR and other Security Transitions in a meaningful way*, October 9, 2023; Simpson, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Report on Youth, Peace and Security*, 106–11.

68 Sommers, 234.

69 Sommers, *The Outcast Majority*, 2.

70 Sommers.

71 United Nations and Folke Bernadotte Academy, *Youth, Peace and Security: A Programming Handbook*, 53.

72 United Nations and Folke Bernadotte Academy, *Youth, Peace and Security: A Programming Handbook*, 18.

73 Shayne Wong, *Beyond Tokenism: A Toolkit for Genuine Youth Participation in Civic Spaces* (Canadian Coalition for Youth, Peace & Security, 2024); Global Coalition on Youth, Peace, and Security, *Implementing the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda at Country-Level: A Guide for Public Officials*.

74 United Nations and Folke Bernadotte Academy, *Youth, Peace and Security: A Programming Handbook*, 16; FBA and CCCPA, “Introduction to the YPS Agenda.”

suggests using transparent vulnerability and risk-based criteria rather than political referrals.<sup>75</sup> Snowball sampling and explicitly asking marginalized youth to identify peers who are excluded may assist teams in widening their reach.<sup>76</sup> Partnering with a local CSO with deep contextual knowledge and networks to identify the most appropriate participants would be critical in this regard.<sup>77</sup>

***Managing Gatekeepers while Expanding Access:*** Efforts to limit traditional gatekeepers, however, must be approached with caution. In many contexts, these actors play a central role in mediating community acceptance, and circumventing them risks generating backlash, undermining programme legitimacy, and potentially exposing participating youth to social or political repercussions. Rather than fully excluding such actors, a more balanced approach may involve engaging them alongside actively pursuing other entry points to limit opportunities for elite capture. At the same time, to manage institutional pressure for quick wins and prioritizing compliant youth, CVR programmes could include a specific quota of “hard-to-reach” or “high-risk” youth, as opposed to a more generic term of “at risk” youth.<sup>78</sup> Donors also have an important role to play to ensure meaningful – as opposed to tokenistic – inclusion of youth (3B).

***When? Participation in Design and M&E:*** To more meaningfully include youth in inception and M&E phases, in addition to implementation, CBR offers several entry points. Community-based approaches recognize reintegration as an issue managed through an inclusive process in the hands of the community, with Project Selection Committees (PSC) and Project Approval Committees (PAC) – also referred to as Community Committees – leading such efforts. As these groups normatively strive to be comprised of an inclusive sample of community stakeholders, youth representatives should also be invited to sit alongside other local stakeholders with *equal* voting rights on project selection and other strategic decisions.<sup>79</sup> This could be framed as strengthening intergenerational partnerships and social cohesion, as it was in Somalia, rather than as circumventing elders, which may cause a backlash.<sup>80</sup> In fact, intergenerational and intercommunal dialogues were repeatedly identified by YPS experts as an area that could strengthen the YPS-DDR linkage.<sup>81</sup> Identification and inclusion of “well-respected” and influential youth leaders, again through local networks, is considered to be important in this regard.<sup>82</sup> In parallel, in the inception phase of these initiatives, practitioners could conduct “visioning exercises” led by youth to

75 Lovise Aalen, *Former Armed Groups in Power and Post-War Youth Policies*, Research Brief, Joint Brief Series: The Political Dynamics of DDR (Folke Bernadotte Academy, Politics After War Research Network, UN DDR Section, 2022), 6.

76 United Nations and Folke Bernadotte Academy, *Youth, Peace and Security: A Programming Handbook*, 87.

77 Interview, CSO, DRC, February 2026.

78 Cho, “A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?”

79 FBA and CCCPA, “Reintegration Modalities,” *DDR and Youth: a practitioner’s guide on how to include youth in DDR and other Security Transitions in a meaningful way*, October 10, 2023; United Nations and Folke Bernadotte Academy, *Youth, Peace and Security: A Programming Handbook*, 14.

80 Interview, CSO, Somalia, February 2026; Ensor, *Securitizing Youth*, 28.

81 Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026; Interview, FBA Working Group on YPS, January 2026.

82 FBA and CCCPA, “Youth Associated with Terrorist Groups: AU OGNs on DDR and CVE.”

define what reintegration would look like to them, shifting away from designing programs *for* youth to designing them *with* youth.<sup>83</sup>

**Youth-Led M&E:** In a similar spirit to youth-led conflict analysis, DDR practitioners could hire existing experts, and/or train young people as evaluators and researchers to set up youth-led M&E mechanisms. In Somalia, for example, after youth participants in a youth at-risk project reported that they had not been given enough influence over the programming and that they had limited channels to communicate with elders in the community, “youth communicators and monitors” were selected from a group of volunteers to participate in the monitoring.<sup>84</sup> Giving them power to define indicators of success, including qualitative ones, and evaluate the programs meant for their own demographic likely promises greater accountability.<sup>85</sup> Combined with the above community committees that include young persons, these efforts would ensure more meaningful youth participation in and throughout M&E mechanisms.

#### D) BEYOND ECONOMIC REDUCTIONISM: POLITICAL (RE)INTEGRATION OF YOUTH

Another pervasive challenge is the tendency to view youth participation in armed groups, and in turn their reintegration, primarily through an economic lens at the expense of political, social and psychosocial dimensions. Programmes often operate on the assumption that economic deprivation, such as poverty and unemployment, is the primary driver of youth recruitment into armed groups.<sup>86</sup> Under this logic, reintegration interventions prioritize vocational training, livelihoods, and short-term cash-for-work schemes. Interviewees also noted that economic initiatives tend to be prioritized because they are “easier to programme and achieve more tangible” and “quantifiable” results than complex political or social interventions.<sup>87</sup>

While economic reasons are significant, this reductionism ignores other critical drivers. Transitional International’s data from multiple contexts – Jordan, Iraq, Mindanao/Philippines, CAR, DRC and Nigeria – shows that there are other important drivers, such as political grievances, the defence of community, religious motivations, and the search for identity that lead to youth mobilization and recidivism. In fact, in Mindanao, Philippines, a significantly higher proportion of youth (15-17) and children highlighted “political reasons” and “religious motivation” for joining the MILF-BIAF than “poverty related reasons”. Similarly in Iraq, 39% of children and youth reported “defend Iraq / defend or liberate from ISIS” as the primary reason for joining armed groups, while this was the case for only 3% of adult ex-combatants. In DRC, a higher proportion of children and youth (15-17) reported joining armed groups in

83 United Nations and Folke Bernadotte Academy, *Youth, Peace and Security: A Programming Handbook*, 45.

84 Schumicky-Logan, “What Is Left for the Youth At-Risk? Honouring Local Peace Dividends, Rehabilitation and Integration through the Relational Sensibility Approach. An Analysis of Reintegration Approaches and Their Effectiveness on Youth at-Risk of Criminalisation – a Somalia Case Study,” 296.

85 Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026.

86 Mercy Corps, *Youth & Consequences: Unemployment, Injustice and Violence* (Mercy Corps, 2015).

87 Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026; Interview, UNIDIR, Headquarters, February 2026.

order to “defend my community, tribe or country” (35%) than due to “unemployment and poverty” (27%).<sup>88</sup> Even within a single context, the degree of economic motivation varies significantly; in Ukraine, for example, young people in rural areas (18–35) report significantly lower locality satisfaction compared to urban youth, with economic considerations representing one among several factors influencing decisions around mobilization, alongside social and security-related dynamics.<sup>89</sup> There is also increasing attention to how patriarchal values drive voluntary armed violence,<sup>90</sup> as well as how individual experiences of intergenerational violence, such as corporal punishment or violence against women, increase the likelihood of mobilization of both young men and women into armed groups.<sup>91</sup> It is therefore evident that economic reintegration alone is insufficient to address the reasons that drove youth to violence in the first place. Also of relevance, there is to date limited empirical evidence that supports the general idea that employment necessarily reduces recidivism for adult, as well as child and youth ex-combatants.<sup>92</sup>

Furthermore, the assumption that economic factors drive youth recruitment and recidivism does not consider how reasons shift throughout the life cycle of combatants. In the DRC, for example, many young people were recruited by force as children but were indoctrinated over time, and stayed as part of armed groups due to a sense of agency and control; experiences clearly highlight that youth’s reasons for joining and staying in armed groups are often a complex mix of economic, ideological, and political reasons that economic reintegration alone cannot address.<sup>93</sup>

At the same time, political reintegration, understood as the transformation of armed groups into peaceful political stakeholders,<sup>94</sup> remains the least developed component of DDR, specifically for youth and more generally as well.<sup>95</sup> Political reintegration often focuses on national-level processes, such as the transformation of armed groups into political parties, and overlooks the more everyday dynamic of securing ex-combatants’ ability to engage in community-level decision-making processes. Negative stereotypes of youth, together with

88 Transitional International, “Profiling of Target Groups: Reasons to Join Armed Groups,” presentation prepared for FBA and CCCPA.

89 Daniel Martínez and Mehmet Korkut, *Unlocking the Potential of Youth in Ukraine: Based on reSCORE Ukraine 2024* (UNDP Ukraine, 2025), 18; Summary of FBA internal meeting, 12 March 2026.

90 Elin Bjarnegård et al., “Armed Violence and Patriarchal Values: A Survey of Young Men in Thailand and Their Military Experiences,” *American Political Science Review* 117, no. 2 (2023): 439–53, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422000594>.

91 Elin Bjarnegård et al., “Violent Boyhoods, Masculine Honor Ideology, and Political Violence: Survey Findings From Thailand,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 36, nos. 15–16 (2021): 7136–60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260519832926>.

92 O’Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*, 89.

93 Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026.

94 Véronique Dudouet et al., *Practitioner Report: Negotiating the Political Integration of Armed Groups in an Era of New Conflict Patterns and Changing Peacemaking Practices* (Berghof Foundation, Folke Bernadotte Academy and Politics After War network, 2025), 4.

95 Transitional International, “Social, Economic, Political (Re)Integration Programming Options,” *Training on DDR and Youth: A Practitioner’s Guide on How to Include Youth in DDR and other Security Transitions in a Meaningful Way*, 2023.

today's narrative around violent extremism, pose additional barriers for young people as authorities often limit civic spaces for youth's political and social movements, fearing that their mobilization may have a destabilizing effect.<sup>96</sup> Ironically, the focus on security measures and narrowing of civic space have shown to reinforce experiences of injustice and strengthen young people's sympathies to violent groups.<sup>97</sup>

The very focus on economic reintegration, for example through vocational training, could also undermine youth's political reintegration after leaving armed groups. In Colombia, ex-combatants in vocational training expressed that the training was designed to make them submissive workers adapted to the status quo, rather than citizens empowered to fight structural injustices through political means.<sup>98</sup> This not only created resentment towards reintegration programmes, but such an approach is at odds with the ethos of political reintegration of ex-combatants that emphasizes political representation and participation in decision-making processes at various levels.

*Internal marginalization within 'rebel-to-party' transitions:* Even when armed groups successfully transform into political parties, political co-option and clientelism poses an additional challenge for meaningful participation of youth. Youth participation is frequently manipulated to serve patronage networks, and access to DDR benefits – jobs, loans, training – becomes conditional on political loyalty. In these contexts, youth wings often function more as “foot soldiers” for the central party machinery than meaningful decision-makers, as seen across contexts in Mozambique, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe and Uganda.<sup>99</sup> The peace process between the government of the Philippines and the MILF offers a rare example of youth being not just foot soldiers but contributing as part of technical and thematic committees in rebel-to-party transitions. During negotiations, young women, although few in number, were chosen for their legal acumen and included into the MILF legal team and not only prepared technical papers but also conducted discreet advocacy around incorporating a gender lens to the peace agreement through their active engagement with informal women's rights networks.<sup>100</sup> Young people continue to hold various legislative and administrative positions in the transitory government in Mindanao, including in the parliament, suggesting that they can make significant contributions to post-war governance and peace even in gerontocratic societies.<sup>101</sup> This example illustrates how youth political reintegration, when treated not as a symbolic inclusion but as

96 FBA and CCCPA, “Introduction to the YPS Agenda.”

97 Ensor, *Securitizing Youth*; Simpson, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Report on Youth, Peace and Security*.

98 Maria Paulina Arango and Stephanie Zuilkowski, “Differentiated Meanings of Education in the Reintegration of Ex-Combatants in Colombia,” *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 44, no. 4 (2023): 509–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2021.2023099>.

99 Lovise Aalen, *Former Armed Groups in Power and Post-War Youth Policies*, Research Brief, Joint Brief Series: The Political Dynamics of DDR (Folke Bernadotte Academy, Politics After War Research Network, UN DDR Section, 2022), 3.

100 Ali Altiok and Irena Grizelj, *We Are Here: An Integrated Approach to Youth-Inclusive Peace Processes* (Youth, Peace and Security, 2019), 19.

101 Primitivo III Cabanes Ragandang, “Historical Injustices, Memory, and Intergenerationality in the Philippines' Bangsamoro Region,” *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 19, nos. 2–3 (2024): 179, <https://doi.org/10.1177/15423166241293845>.

substantive participation, can move beyond economic reductionism and facilitate young people's transformation into legitimate political stakeholders in their own right.

### Opportunities and Entry Points

**Leveraging IDDRS Youth Module:** *The Youth & DDR* module of the IDDRS can provide helpful leverage to move away from viewing youth primarily as threats, in turn leading to economic reductionism in their reintegration, towards engaging with them as partners and political agents. One of the main paradigm shifts from the 2006 to 2019 IDDRS youth modules is the renewed emphasis on agency and partnerships. Citing UN Security Council Resolution 2250, the revised IDDRS describe youth as “agents of change” and explicitly state that planning should take into account “youth-led” participation, such as “youth-led community peace education” and “youth-managed peer education and mentoring” programmes.<sup>102</sup>

**Civic and Political Literacy:** To prevent political co-optation, DDR interventions should pay greater focus on political literacy and civic education in parallel to economic reintegration initiatives. Teaching rank-and-file ex-combatants, a group to which most young people belong, about their political rights, how to organize independent civil society groups, and how to hold leaders accountable allows formerly armed women and men a channel to pursue political integration without being co-opted by often more senior leaders.<sup>103</sup> Embedding civic education and political literacy into reintegration programmes would equip youth with the skills to pursue their grievances through non-violent means, such as advocacy, debating, and community organizing, rather than returning to arms; these workshops could be jointly attended by non-combatant youth to ensure a conflict-sensitive approach.<sup>104</sup>

**Physical Spaces for Political Engagement and Belonging:** Beyond formal education, providing dedicated physical space – such as youth centres – serves as a low-cost but critical entry point for sustaining political engagement and preventing recidivism. In Somalia, for example, graduates of reintegration programs are granted free access to “third spaces” or clubs where they can gather, organize, and access continuous support.<sup>105</sup> Rather than merely keeping youth occupied, these centres function like a fraternity, offering a stable environment for peer networking and leadership development. Through this consistent access, different pathways for agency emerge: some youth utilize these spaces to become deeply politically engaged or pursue formal leadership positions, while others use them as platforms for community dialogue and peace efforts. By transitioning from “graduates” of a programme to active members of a local hub, young people can maintain their social and political momentum in a safe, non-violent environment.

102 United Nations, 5.30 *Youth and DDR*, 28–29.

103 Berghof Foundation and UN DPO DDR Section, *Leaving Conflict Firmly Behind Through the Political Transformation of Armed Groups: Notes for DDR and Peacebuilding Practitioners* (Berghof Foundation and United Nations Department of Peace Operations, 2022), 20.

104 Nagai and Harper, *Youth Associated with Non-State Armed Groups: Building an Evidence Base on Disengagement Pathways and Reintegration Challenges*, 3.

105 Interview, CSO, Somalia, February 2026.

**Supporting Independence of Youth Structures:** While often overlooked, it is also important for DDR practitioners to work with local partners to prepare the community to accept the political voice and agency of young people.<sup>106</sup> To further support the independence of youth wings and civil society organizations, donors could provide funding that is not channeled through the main rebel group-transformed-political party to allow youth to operate without excessive political interference.<sup>107</sup>

**DDR Mediation Support for Youth Inclusion:** Another DDR-related tool, DDR mediation support, could offer an entry point to strengthen meaningful youth inclusion into broader security transitions. DDR practitioners are often the first international staff deployed with a mandate to engage directly with armed groups.<sup>108</sup> Leveraging this access, DDR experts can both advise mediators to ensure that peace negotiations include specific clauses addressing the needs of youth, as well as actively advocate for the inclusion of youth representatives in peace negotiations and national dialogue processes. This would help ensure that specific grievances driving youth recruitment and recidivism are addressed, rather than just the grievances of older commanders.<sup>109</sup> This would also strengthen the image of youth as assets to society and contributors to peace.

## **E) BEYOND ECONOMIC REDUCTIONISM: SOCIAL REINTEGRATION AS RECALIBRATION OF IDENTITY**

The focus on economic reintegration also often overlooks critical social dimensions, including deep psychological shifts and the need to recalibrate one's sense of identity. According to DDR practitioners across contexts, a major, yet frequently underestimated, consequence of life within armed groups is the erosion of social fluency; young people who spend their formative years isolated from conventional society often lose the practical ability to navigate everyday civilian interactions.<sup>110</sup> In these contexts, addressing this so-called social skills deficit becomes even more urgent than providing vocational or trade training.<sup>111</sup> Experiences highlight that there is therefore a pressing need for individuals to develop the basic social norms required for peaceful coexistence, such as effectively trading in a market, resolving conflicts without resorting to aggression, and navigating everyday interactions with family and community members.<sup>112</sup>

106 Interview, FBA Working Group on DDR; Elman Peace et al., *Guidance Note on Supporting Community-Based Reintegration of Former Members of Armed Forces and Groups*, 53.

107 Aalen, *Former Armed Groups in Power and Post-War Youth Policies*.

108 United Nations Department of Peace Operations, *The Evolving Nature of DDR: Study on Engaging Armed Groups across the Peace Continuum* (United Nations Department of Peace Operations, 2021), 16.

109 United Nations, *5.30 Youth and DDR*, 30.

110 Interview, CSO, DRC, February 2026; Interview, CSO, Somalia, February 2026.

111 Nagai and Harper, *Youth Associated with Non-State Armed Groups: Building an Evidence Base on Disengagement Pathways and Reintegration Challenges*.

112 Interview, UNIDIR, Headquarters, February 2026.

While often treated as a static beneficiary demographic, DDR practitioners stress that when young people leave armed groups, they are confronted with their “identity in transition”.<sup>113</sup> Armed groups often provide status, fraternity and sorority, and a sense of purpose; upon exit, this identity collapses. Without a viable alternative identity, young people may experience extreme alienation, frustration and marginalization from society, conditions that economic training alone cannot address.

This process is further complicated by the stigma attached to former members of armed groups. Depending on different factors, young people leaving armed groups may be viewed with suspicion or fear, which constrains their ability to rebuild social ties and re-establish a sense of belonging.<sup>114</sup> Crucially, such social exclusion also undermines economic reintegration, as stigma can limit access to employment and livelihood opportunities, both in the short- and the long-terms.

Closely tied to this is a young person’s relationship with the weapon itself, a dimension that is often decisive for the development of a young person’s self-worth while in armed groups. For young people mobilized during their formative years, carrying a weapon often becomes the primary source of their status and perceived responsibility.<sup>115</sup> The weapon frequently serves as a tangible marker of their agency and worth, and if the reintegration process fails to offer a civilian equivalent of a sense of purpose and social standing, the resulting vacuum may deepen a sense of identity collapse.<sup>116</sup> While the loss of such status affects all ex-combatants, it is often uniquely heightened for the youth demographic, for whom the weapon may represent their only tangible experience of adult agency and social standing.

In active conflict environments, the difficulty of identity recalibration is heightened because transitions out of military service is often not a definitive, one-off transition, but rather a cyclical and uncertain phase. For young ex-combatants in Ukraine, as well as elsewhere where DDR occurs in parallel to ongoing conflict, attempting to reintegrate into civilian life while knowing they may have to mobilize again has profound consequences for their wellbeing and future outlook; it forces them to navigate civilian life while maintaining a combat-ready mindset, which can shape and complicate the formation of long-term professional goals and stable social ties, even as many demonstrate the capacity to balance both civilian and defender identities simultaneously.<sup>117</sup>

Adequate psychosocial support is another aspect that is often overlooked in formal DDR efforts. Participatory research with formerly armed young people in Nigeria revealed that many young people have never had safe spaces to process their experiences.<sup>118</sup> At the same time, youth often

113 Interview, CSO, Somalia, February 2026.

114 Interview, CSO, Mozambique, February 2026.

115 United Nations, *5.20 Youth and DDR*, 7.

116 O’Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*, 242.

117 Summary of FBA internal meeting, 12 March 2026.

118 Broeckhoven et al., *Picturing Conflict*.

embody a complex perpetrator-victim duality, many of them who have been forcibly recruited yet implicated in violence against their own communities.<sup>119</sup> This both elevates the need for psychosocial interventions and calls into question the effectiveness of currently prevalent one-size-fits-all approaches, which risk both overextension and under-service.

### Opportunities & Entry Points

***(Re)Learning Norms and Expectations of Civilian Life:*** Interviewees consistently pointed to the need for reintegration programs to explicitly address identity and norms and the opportunity to leverage peer-to-peer learning in this regard. An initiative based in Liberia may serve as a helpful example. A practical example of peer-based norm recalibration, a series of workshops equipped formerly armed young men with practical skills on how to “carry themselves” for civilian life – so-called simple aspects like how to dress, engage with other people, and behave in institutions like banks and markets without inadvertently intimidating others and being perceived as threats.<sup>120</sup> These initiatives move beyond abstract life-skills training towards concrete rehearsal of civilian roles.

***Accompanying Economic with Social Support in the DRC:*** A similarly structured approach is employed by a CSO in the DRC, which utilizes a phased, community-integrated model for social and economic reintegration.<sup>121</sup> Before starting technical vocational training, the programme conducts five intensive sessions of community-based “de-traumatization” involving both formerly armed youth and their non-combatant peers. This foundational phase allows participants to express their individual and shared grievances and hopes, and develop a “life project” before choosing a professional skill to pursue. Then, during the subsequent six-month professional training period, the curriculum explicitly incorporates “life skills,” such as non-violent communication, stress management, and peaceful communal living. Crucially, the process is followed by a one-year follow-up period characterized by peer-to-peer coaching and mentoring, as well as organized inter-village exchange sessions that help youth build social networks beyond their immediate surroundings. By providing government-recognized certifications and ongoing support, this model ensures that youth transition from simply receiving vocational skills training to sustainable, incoming-generating livelihoods while simultaneously contributing to community reconciliation.

***Strengthening Youth Networks and Peer Systems:*** Peer-to-peer models and youth networks have played a positive contribution to reintegration in other contexts as well. In Somalia, for example, “alumni networks” of graduates of reintegration programs function as alternative fraternities and sororities, sustaining pro-social belonging after formal programming ends.<sup>122</sup> Youth centres, physical spaces where these young people can gather and organize different activities, then plays a critical role in reducing isolation and reinforcing adopted identities

119 Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026.

120 Interview, UNIDIR, Headquarters, February 2026.

121 Interview, CSO, DRC, February 2026.

122 Interview, CSO, Somalia, February 2026.

over time.<sup>123</sup> Identity recalibration is deeply relational, and strengthening existing peer network is mentioned as a potential inexpensive yet effective way to support the long-term and significant identity shifts that young ex-combatants face upon return.

***Tiered Psychosocial Support:*** Regarding psychosocial support, rather than assuming universal programming, DDR practitioners suggest a shift towards a tiered and flexible approach. Military and psychological studies emphasize that warfare disrupts the social network around children and slows socio-cognitive development, making them highly susceptible to prolonged trauma and re-recruitment if holistic mental health and educational support are not provided.<sup>124</sup> A scalable base layer – such as train-the-trainer models, peer support groups – can serve as an entry point for the majority of youth leaving armed groups. Then, those requiring more specialized care can be referred upwards, with referral pathways leading to more intensive clinical support.<sup>125</sup> In this regard, participatory research and storytelling initiatives, such as the one exemplified by UNIDIR Managing Exits from Armed Conflict Project, demonstrate that structured, empathetic engagement itself can serve as a form of psychosocial support.<sup>126</sup> In low-resource contexts, being heard and recognized has shown to contribute to dignity restoration and emotional processing.<sup>127</sup>

***Adaptive and Case-Based Programming:*** What comes out clearly in the limits of social reintegration today is the tendency to approach youth as a homogeneous caseload, often overlooking dimensions such as gender, class, race, as well as varying levels of psychosocial needs. In practice, young people enter armed groups for different reasons and remain for different reasons and consequently, their pathways out differ. As such, interventions to support young people's identity in transition should move towards a more adaptive and flexible model rather than assuming every participant requires identical packages. For example, a CSO actor in Somalia described highly individualized case management approaches that factor in the specific trajectories and motivations that shaped each young person's mobilization, as well as the family and community contexts, such as stigma exposure, that shape their reintegration.<sup>128</sup> Caseworkers who work with youth ex-combatants are deeply familiar with communities and support and follow graduates of reintegration programs through different life stages as they inevitably find and lose jobs and experience other significant life changes.<sup>129</sup> This individualized approach recognizes that some youth may require identity reconstruction and character development; others may require political literacy, leadership opportunities, or structured mentorship. Adaptive programming also requires flexibility in delivery mechanisms. Procurement cycles and standardized start-up

123 Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development Working Group on Youth and Peacebuilding, *Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding: A Practice Note*.

124 Morelli, "The Importance of Educational and Mental Health Support in Youth DDR Operations."

125 Interview, UNIDIR, Headquarters, February 2026.

126 Broeckhoven et al., *Picturing Conflict*.

127 Anamika Madhuraj, *Shifting the Focus: Insights from Conflict-Affected Children and Youth on Peacebuilding and Recovery* (UNIDIR, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.37559/MEAC/24/07>.

128 Interview, CSO, Somalia, February 2026.

129 Interview, CSO, Somalia, February 2026; Interview, CSO, DRC, February 2026.

kits often constrain responsiveness; moving towards referral-based systems and flexible support structures can better accommodate youth mobility, urbanization trends, and shifting security conditions.<sup>130</sup>

***Recognizing Existing Youth Contribution to Disengagement and Reintegration:*** It is important to recognize that young people are already acting as architects of their own and their peers' reintegration through informal pathways. In contexts where formal state or non-governmental organisation (NGO) support is absent or insufficient, youth often establish informal peer networks that act as a "virtual underground railroad" to facilitate the exit and survival of their associates.<sup>131</sup> In camps with internally displaced persons (IDP), for example, former associates of groups like Islamic State and Al-Shabaab have been found to rely on other former associates for essential needs like food and shelter when families or the state fail to provide support, creating a vital safety net that formal DDR often overlooks.<sup>132</sup> This illustrates that even networks developed in armed groups could be repurposed to facilitate reintegration.

Furthermore, young people have made significant contributions to community reconciliation across different contexts. Beyond merely attending training, youth-led organizations have initiated symbolic acts of peace, such as the "Letters for Reconciliation" campaign in Colombia, where young people sent messages welcoming former FARC combatants back to society.<sup>133</sup> This transition from hostility to trust is similarly fostered in Somalia through the Quraca Nabadda process. This initiative utilizes a uniquely Somali trust-building approach to address collective trauma through 12-week community reconciliation workshops.<sup>134</sup> By involving a diverse group, including young people, women, and male clan elders as facilitators and participants, the process harmonizes the "wisdom of the elders" with the "energy of the youth".<sup>135</sup> These workshops focus on restorative justice and peacebuilding, allowing community members to respond to the needs of disengaged combatants and rebuild social confidence. Such engagement can shift a young person's perceived identity from victim/perpetrator to active contributor to peace, fostering community reconciliation.

## **F) THE "GREY ZONE" DILEMMA: MOBILIZED AS CHILDREN BUT DEMOBILIZED AS ADULTS**

Another key challenge, and significant opportunity, of integrating a youth-sensitive approach to DDR interventions involves a substantial caseload of former combatants who are recruited as children under 18 but demobilized as adults, also referred to as Child Mobilized-Adult

130 Interview, UNIDIR, Headquarters, February 2026.

131 O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*.

132 Broeckhoven et al., *Picturing Conflict*.

133 Cristina Petcu, "Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Programming with Colombia's Youth," *International Order & Conflict Working Paper* (Washington DC), 2020.

134 Elman Peace et al., *Guidance Note on Supporting Community-Based Reintegration of Former Members of Armed Forces and Groups*.

135 Ragandang, "Historical Injustices, Memory, and Intergenerationality in the Philippines' Bangsamoro Region," 180.

Demobilized (CM-AD). While this group is often defined by the legal and developmental gaps they fall into, they simultaneously represent a cohort with unique wartime experiences and latent leadership capacities developed during their formative years. Recognizing these individuals not only as a vulnerable “grey zone”, but as actors with existing resilience is critical to moving beyond a deficit-based intervention model.

Without a targeted intervention, this cohort falls into a “grey zone” where they lose the benefits from specific rights and protection mandates (i.e. Convention on the Rights of the Child)<sup>136</sup> but lack the education, skills, or social standing to reintegrate as adults.<sup>137</sup> Their specific needs are often missed by programming because they do not fit neatly into child protection or adult DDR approaches that have a heavy livelihood focus. In Uganda, for example, young adults who had been abducted as children but released as adults expressed frustration that programs either excluded them from child-specific benefits despite their similar developmental disruptions, or treated them as children, negating their agency.<sup>138</sup> That DDR initiatives often, and increasingly, unfold in extremely resource-limited settings that lack support even to the “classic child soldier category” under 18 means that while there is growing acknowledgement that this population has been historically under-supported, this is rarely translated into funded initiatives.<sup>139</sup> Young people in the “grey zone” demographic may also face an additional challenge in entering formal DDR programmes. DDR screening often requires proof of combatant status, such as lists supplied by commanders or more traditionally possession of a weapon, which sometimes excludes “grey zone” children and youth who served in support roles, as intelligence gatherers, or on part-time basis.

Further complications of appropriately addressing the “grey zone” demographics stem from their neurobiological circumstances. There is growing recognition of neurobiological specificities of youth and that youthhood is a time of rapid socio-cognitive development where relational bonds shift from the family to peer and mentor networks and practical life skills amass quickly.<sup>140</sup> Recent survey data stresses that individuals who entered armed groups as children show a particularly high tendency towards high commitment-low trust social bonds, weak information processing and reasoning skills, an exaggerated fear of group rejection, and a narrow and often polarized world view.<sup>141</sup> These poses another layer of consideration that should be factored into disengagement and reintegration efforts.

136 Oxford Pro Bono Publico Programme, *Youth Associated with Non-State Armed Groups: Legal Protections and Vulnerabilities under International Law* (University of Oxford Faculty of Law, 2025).

137 Nagai, *The Missing Pillar: Re-Centering Disengagement and Reintegration in the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda for a More Innovative Approach to Sustaining Peace*, 7; FBA and CCCPA, “Children and Youth in Integrated DDR Processes,” *DDR and Youth: a practitioner’s guide on how to include youth in DDR and other Security Transitions in a meaningful way*, October 10, 2023.

138 Siobhan O’Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, eds., *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict* (United Nations University, 2018), 89.

139 Interview, UNIDIR, Headquarters, February 2026.

140 Interview, UNIDIR, Headquarters, February 2026.

141 Yosuke Nagai and Erica Harper, *Youth Associated with Non-State Armed Groups: Building an Evidence Base on Disengagement Pathways and Reintegration Challenges*, Research Brief (Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, 2023), 13.

The Ukrainian context illustrates a unique angle of the grey zone demographic where the 18–24 cohort – often mobilizing voluntarily – undergoes early transitions between civilian and military roles, sometimes before fully establishing long-term professional trajectories or civilian adult identities. This pipeline mirrors some of the social capital deficits seen in traditional grey zone populations, as these young veterans demobilize into a civilian life they never inhabited as adults. This lack of adult social capital and civilian social fluency may contribute to challenges in long-term economic and social reintegration, including, for some, a preference to return to military service.<sup>142</sup>

### Opportunities and Entry Points

**Dual-Age Intake Protocol:** Standard screening often only captures the individual’s current age. To capture the “grey zone” demographic – individuals mobilized as children but demobilized as adults – practitioners could operationalize a “dual-age” intake protocol during the initial registration. Profiling questionnaires could explicitly record both “age at recruitment” and “age at demobilization.” This identifies a specific caseload, provisionally estimated at 24% to 30% demobilized populations by World Bank and other data,<sup>143</sup> who are legally adults but developmentally have weaker education profiles, fewer economic opportunities, and less social capital than those mobilized as adults. While precise numbers of this demographic are difficult to assess, recent survey across Somalia, Yemen, South Sudan, and Colombia suggest that significant portions of individuals belong to this specific high-risk cohort.<sup>144</sup>

**Accelerated Education and Social Support:** This caseload may be approached through specialized programming that combines adult economic autonomy with accelerated learning opportunities usually reserved for children. Given the additional barrier that youth are often reluctant to resume formal basic education because of the stigma of attending schools with children of much younger age, it is preferable that they be given an opportunity for a youth-specific education track.<sup>145</sup> This category may also significantly benefit from initiatives that equip formerly armed young men and women with norms and practical skills on how to “carry themselves” for civilian life, as suggested in *Section 3.E*.

**Tailored Judicial Approach:** Tailored judicial screening is also needed for the “grey zone” demographic facing criminal accountability. To bridge the gap between juvenile and adult justice systems, when screening youth for prosecution, practitioners could apply specific mitigating factors. For example, if an individual currently an adult was recruited as a child, the judicial screening should consider the coercive environment of their recruitment and

142 Summary of FBA internal meeting, 12 March 2026.

143 O’Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*, 243.

144 Nagai and Harper, *Youth Associated with Non-State Armed Groups: Building an Evidence Base on Disengagement Pathways and Reintegration Challenges*.

145 United Nations, *5.20 Youth and DDR*, Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (United Nations, 2006), 2.

their status as a child at the time of the alleged offence.<sup>146</sup> In this regard, DDR practitioners could establish procedures where the age of recruitment data triggers a different prosecutorial track or sentencing guideline, ensuring that the individual is not treated solely as a willing adult combatant.<sup>147</sup>

***YPS Lens to CM-AD Demographic:*** Applying a YPS lens provides a pathway to move beyond rigid child–adult binaries by foregrounding the specific developmental and relational needs of those in transition between these categories. This is particularly relevant for the CM-AD cohort, who often fall between programming frameworks: too old for child-focused support, yet lacking the social and economic positioning assumed in adult reintegration pathways. A YPS approach therefore enables more tailored interventions that recognize their liminal status, while also shifting practitioners away from viewing them solely as a “risk caseload” towards engaging their endogenous capacities and resilience.<sup>148</sup> When treated as equal partners rather than passive beneficiaries, these individuals can leverage the leadership skills and agency developed during conflict to contribute as community leaders and “peace ambassadors”.<sup>149</sup>

***Leveraging Flexible Eligibility through CVR and CBR:*** Regarding the second challenge related to proving combatant status, more recently developed DDR-related tools, notably CVR, may offer a more flexible and encompassing tool. By allowing for the inclusion of “at-risk youth”, thereby bypassing the strict “combatant” criteria, this eligibility criteria could facilitate the inclusion of youth in the “grey zone” who may find harder to prove combatant status to benefit from needed interventions.

Similarly, CBR approaches may leverage a similar advantage to reach those who face difficulties proving combatant status by including all youth affected by violence regardless of their membership in armed groups. Community-based approaches could also improve participation of hard-to-access populations, such as female youth and their children, who more often spontaneously demobilize rather than going through DDR programmes.<sup>150</sup>

## **G) (MIS)PERCEPTIONS BETWEEN DDR & YPS COMMUNITIES**

While the previous sections draw on both existing research and policy analyses, this section is grounded primarily in interview materials. Although the mutual (mis)perceptions between DDR and YPS communities are not yet systematically addressed in the literature, they

146 FBA and CCCPA, “Youth Associated with Terrorist Groups: AU OGNs on DDR and CVE,” *DDR and Youth: a practitioner’s guide on how to include youth in DDR and other Security Transitions in a meaningful way*, October 11, 2023.

147 United Nations, *5.30 Youth and DDR*, 32.

148 Laura Henao-Izquierdo, *Political Transition, Reintegration and the Challenges of Reconciliation in Colombia from the Perspective of Youth*, *Outside the Box: Amplifying Youth Voices and Views on YPS Policy and Practice* (Interpeace & Irish Aid, 2025).

149 Interview, CSO, DRC, February 2026.

150 O’Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*, 89.

emerged consistently and strikingly across interviews. As such, they constitute an important and under-documented area, as these perceptions and the awareness gaps shape how concepts and policies are interpreted and operationalized in different ways.

Among DDR practitioners who do not specialize in youth programming, the “how” around embedding YPS values into DDR is perceived to be unclear, with practitioners noting a gap in clear guidelines and documented “best practices” on how to integrate youth as agents of programme design.<sup>151</sup> Some practitioners note that the YPS agenda is “not yet mature”,<sup>152</sup> and that while YPS frameworks suggest M&E indicators that may be suited at the national level, there is limited guidance for practitioners around how these may be translated into more grounded context-specific ones that capture not just quantifiable outputs, such as number of recipients of vocational training, but also whether this actually translated into weakened ties with armed groups, behavioral change, or community reconciliation.<sup>153</sup> There is also a (mis)perception that embedding a YPS approach may feel “forced” and neglect other elements that are important for the overall success of programmes.<sup>154</sup>

Crucially, it is important to recognize that the YPS agenda has increasingly evolved beyond a purely normative framework. In practice, YPS now functions as a comprehensive analytical, policy, and operational approach used by multilateral organizations, governments, and civil society to better understand conflict dynamics and design more inclusive peace, security, and stabilization efforts.<sup>155</sup> Over the past decade, this framework has informed conflict analysis and programming across a range of contexts, including within UN and EU missions, regional organizations, and national strategies.<sup>156</sup> Understanding YPS as a practical framework, rather than just a set of principles, reinforces the argument that this shift is not merely a normative aspiration, but an operational reality where progress and youth contributions are already being realized at different levels.

At the same time, multiple YPS practitioners view DDR as the “hardest” pillar to operationalize.<sup>157</sup> There seems to be a shared sense that the *Disengagement and Reintegration* pillar is “more technical” and “less normative” than the other four pillars of YPS and is perceived to be more difficult to mainstream across different workstreams.<sup>158</sup> At a different level, YPS practitioners sometimes see DDR as having very rigorous and more institutionalized ways of working that makes it difficult to combine with normative shifts such as YPS that involves critical power analysis of existing structures.<sup>159</sup>

151 Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026.

152 Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026.

153 Interview, UNIDIR, Headquarters, February 2026.

154 Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026.

155 Tanghøj and Scarpelini, *Youth, Peace and Security Adviser's Handbook*.

156 United Nations and Folke Bernadotte Academy, *Youth, Peace and Security: A Programming Handbook*; DCAF - Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, *The Youth, Peace and Security Agenda and Security Sector Governance and Reform*, SSR Backgrounder Series (DCAF, 2024).

157 Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026; Interview, FBA Working Group on YPS, January 2026.

158 Interview, FBA Working Group on YPS, January 2026.

159 Interview, FBA Working Group on YPS, January 2026.

Given different frames of reference, challenges also arise from concepts such as “partnership” and “agency” being interpreted and operationalized in different ways. In DDR-related activities in Somalia, for example, major international actors understood partnerships with youth as consultations or at best a local counterpart who is approached after the programme design has been decided.<sup>160</sup> By contrast, YPS frameworks conceptualize partnership as “co-creation” where youth are treated as “governance actors” and “architects” of the work, holding organizations accountable rather than serving as passive recipients.<sup>161</sup> Similarly in Northern Mozambique, genuine partnership is viewed as engaging young religious leaders who already hold legitimate influence within youth networks that formal actors cannot reach, appreciating their political agency.<sup>162</sup> A similar divergence emerges in understandings of “agency”; in DDR contexts, youth agency tends to be primarily framed in economic and behavioral terms as their capacity to disengage from violence and choose a livelihood pathway.<sup>163</sup> On the other hand, individuals from YPS communities would underscore political and transformative agency, looking beyond their economic survival and towards youth’s capacity and right to shape decision-making processes and redefine their identities.<sup>164</sup>

One of the most persistent challenges in bridging these fields is the formal-informality dilemma. The landscape of youth involvement in peace and security is increasingly defined by a proliferation of informal initiatives that operate outside the scope of traditional DDR research. This “mushrooming” of informality, exemplified by the discovery of over 150 informal youth-led peacebuilding initiatives in Mindanao, is often a direct systemic response to formal political structures dominated by the “old and the wise”.<sup>165</sup> Because formal nodes of power and politics frequently exclude those deemed so-called “not-so-wise”, youth are frequently forced to coalesce into informal clusters that are detached from the institutional hierarchy.

This informality creates a significant paradox for DDR and YPS practitioners: while these initiatives are often the most active at the community-level, they remain less funded and largely invisible to donors who traditionally prefer to support formal organizations.<sup>166</sup> However, the lack of formal recognition does not diminish their strategic value. In Colombia, for example, “clandestine youth” – political or urban members of the FARC – served as critical informal intermediaries; despite being marginalized from official DDR processes and the formal rebel-to-party transition, these educated and trusted individuals acted as the primary bridges for reconciliation between ex-combatants and broader society.<sup>167</sup>

160 Interview, CSO, Somalia, February 2026.

161 Interview, CSO, Somalia, February 2026.

162 Interview, CSO, Mozambique, February 2026.

163 Cristina Petcu, “Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Programming with Colombia’s Youth,” *International Order & Conflict Working Paper* (Washington DC), 2020; Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026.

164 Interview, UNIDIR, Headquarters, February 2026; Interview, CSO, Somalia, February 2026.

165 Primitivo III Ragandang, “Fish Love? Youth Inclusion in Formal (Post) Conflict Structures,” in *Youth Peacebuilding: From Theory to Practice* (US Mission to ASEAN: Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative, 2022).

166 Ragandang, “Fish Love? Youth Inclusion in Formal (Post) Conflict Structures.”

167 Henao-Izquierdo, *Political Transition, Reintegration and the Challenges of Reconciliation in Colombia from the Perspective of Youth*.

Interviews also pointed to a mutual awareness gap, that few in the DDR nor YPS community fully understands the other's operational reality. People working on youth inclusion, for example, are many times not aware of what DDR technically entails and where potential entry points may lie.<sup>168</sup> Conversely, DDR practitioners often lack awareness of YPS frameworks and the availability of applicable guidelines, especially when they are not actively shared within their organizations.<sup>169</sup> DDR practitioners report an additional challenge when working with national authorities who often lack a concept of youth as a distinct category from children, but are at the driver's seat of determining priorities and target beneficiaries.<sup>170</sup>

### Opportunities and Entry Points

Despite the misperceptions and institutional silos identified above, interviews also point to a number of concrete opportunities and entry points for strengthening linkages between DDR and the YPS agenda.

***Documenting and Translating “Best Practices”:*** First, there may be scope for more systematic harvesting and circulation of “best practices” from DDR-adjacent contexts that have grappled with similar structural challenges around youth inclusion, even if they were not explicitly framed as YPS initiatives. Practitioners pointed, for example, to experiences in gerontocratic societies where programmes have had to navigate entrenched age hierarchies in order to engage younger populations meaningfully.<sup>171</sup> Lessons from such contexts offer practical insights for DDR settings where youth agency may be politically or culturally constrained. Actively documenting and translating these experiences into operational guidance could help demystify the “how” of youth-sensitive DDR programming.

***Demonstrating Added Value of Youth Inclusion:*** Second, it was also emphasized that resistance to incorporating YPS into DDR stems less from principled disagreement than from uncertainty about added value. In this regard, providing concrete, contextually grounded examples where youth-sensitive approaches have contributed to the overall effectiveness and legitimacy of DDR programmes may be particularly impactful.<sup>172</sup> Such examples can illustrate how engaging youth as social and political actors, rather than solely as beneficiaries, has strengthened programme legitimacy, improved reintegration outcomes, or enhanced community acceptance. Importantly, practitioners noted that these benefits often accrue not only to youth themselves, but to broader societal dynamics, including social cohesion and trust in post-conflict institutions.

168 Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026; Interview, FBA Working Group on YPS, January 2026.

169 Interview, FBA Working Group on DDR, February 2026; Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026.

170 Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026.

171 Interview, FBA Working Group on YPS, January 2026.

172 Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026; Interview, FBA Working Group on YPS, January 2026.

**Adaptive, Context-Sensitive Framing:** Relatedly, appropriate and creative framing may facilitate the integration of YPS perspectives into DDR. Practitioners cautioned that explicit “YPS labelling” may, in some contexts, generate resistance or be perceived as externally imposed.<sup>173</sup> Several noted that youth-sensitive approaches are often more readily accepted when framed through concepts such as social cohesion, community resilience, or intergenerational dialogue, areas that already align closely with the evolving objectives of DDR, particularly within its reintegration and community-based components.<sup>174</sup> This suggests that meaningful entry points for YPS do not always require explicit rebranding, but can be pursued through adaptive language and programming that resonates with local and institutional priorities.

**Structured Exchange between DDR & YPS Communities:** Finally, addressing the mutual awareness gap between DDR and YPS communities may be among the early steps to strengthen the linkages between the two fields. DDR practitioners frequently noted limited exposure to YPS frameworks and applicable guidance, especially when these are not actively disseminated within organizations. Conversely, YPS practitioners often lack detailed understanding of how contemporary DDR programmes operate in practice, including the constraints imposed by national ownership, eligibility criteria, and security considerations.<sup>175</sup> Creating structured spaces for exchange, whether through joint trainings, communities of practice, or integrated planning processes, could help bridge these divides and enable more realistic identification of entry points that are both normatively meaningful and operationally feasible.

**Case-Based Joint Trainings:** To optimize these exchanges, trainings should be preceded by baseline primers, providing short, mandatory materials to be completed as a prerequisite. By establishing this shared foundation, the exchange can move towards anchoring learning from best practices and added value, using concrete examples to demonstrate how youth-sensitive approaches improve programme legitimacy and community acceptance. These joint sessions could rely less on theoretical lectures but on case-based simulations, such as designing a registration protocol for the grey zone demographic or a context-appropriate eligibility criteria, which would encourage practitioners to together consider and discuss both technical security imperatives and normative YPS mandates.

173 Interview, FBA Working Group on YPS, January 2026.

174 Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026.

175 Interview, International Training Center, Egypt, January 2026.

# 04 *Suggestions for Next Steps Ahead*

Across the preceding sections, several key conclusions emerge. The review of chapters shows that youth are frequently treated as a homogeneous, age-defined caseload, which not only obscures the distinct needs of “grey zone” populations but also renders the experiences of young women largely invisible. When participation does occur, it is often undermined by tokenism or restricted by traditional gatekeepers, preventing youth from acting as genuine partners in programme design. Furthermore, the tendency towards economic reductionism often prioritizes short-term vocational training at the expense of necessary political inclusion and social identity recalibration.

The following recommendations build directly on these insights, intended to facilitate the operationalization of the *opportunities and entry points* identified throughout this report. First, the proposed shift towards context-specific and differentiated youth categories responds to the challenges of rigid age-based definitions by centering local cultural markers of adulthood. It then condenses important considerations for five different stakeholders at this nexus – DDR practitioners, YPS practitioners, youth actors and networks, donors, and researchers – for field studies, consultations, and verification workshops in subsequent phases.

## **A) CROSS-CUTTING PRIORITY: DEVELOPING CONTEXT-SPECIFIC AND DIFFERENTIATED YOUTH CATEGORIES**

Across all stakeholders, one of the first priorities is to move beyond treating youth as a homogeneous demographic defined solely by age (15–24 of IDDRS or 18–29 of YPS). When external age categories are enforced at the expense of cultural understandings of youth, this risks undermining both the effectiveness and legitimacy of DDR initiatives from the perspectives of communities. The following approaches suggest ways to develop alternative concepts of youth that could inform youth-sensitive DDR programming.

- 1. Participatory mapping to identify cultural markers of youthhood:** Early in the project, engage diverse young people as research partners – both ex-combatants and others – to map how youth identify themselves and are perceived by local actors, avoiding the imposition of external definitions. Include other relevant members of the community to integrate and consider their viewpoints. The international YPS or DDR age brackets may be used as a starting point for these discussions, but should be open to contextual attunement.
  - *Sample guiding questions at this stage: What are milestones (i.e. marriage, economic independence, home ownership) that signal the transition to adulthood? How do these thresholds / rites of passage differ for men versus women? Which groups of people – class, ethnic, geographic – are most at risk of being trapped in “waithood”? Is there community stigma or intergenerational mistrust between youth and elders?*

**2. Developing DDR-appropriate categorization of sub-groups:** Identify relevant sub-groups for specialized programming and partnerships. Pertinent categories of youth actors for programming, dependent on the context, may include CM-AD population, self-demobilized youth, young women, young parents, and youth involved in rebel-to-party transitions. This stage would also intentionally identify youth groups for future partnerships, such as influential youth religious or community leaders, youth in informal networks, and youth as researchers.

- *Sample guiding questions at this stage: Conventional dimensions: How do intersecting identities – including gender, ethnic, class, religious distinctions – create different social standings for youth in their communities? DDR-specific dimensions: Based on the "dual-age" framework of recruitment and demobilization, what are the distinct characteristics and estimated size of the CM-AD population? For both the CM-AD demographic and other youth groups in general, what critical developmental and educational milestones were missed during the duration of their combatant life? Did individuals hold leadership roles or seniority during their time in armed groups? Which youth groups are already contributing to prevention and reintegration efforts?*

## **B) TARGETED IMPLICATIONS FOR FIVE DDR & YPS ACTORS**

### **1. DDR Practitioners**

- *Shift from beneficiaries to co-designers:* Conduct visioning exercises led by young persons during the inception phase to define what reintegration looks to them, ensuring programs are designed with youth rather than simply for them. Include young persons across the programme cycle (analysis, design, implementation, and M&E) through, for example, youth-led conflict analysis, advocating for their participation in community committees, and youth-led monitoring mechanisms.
- *Move beyond economic reductionism:* Complement livelihoods support with political literacy, civic literacy and “life skills” support as a parallel track to facilitate social fluency and identity recalibration.
- *Shift towards adaptive and case-based programming:* Empower CSOs that are already adopting individualized case management and referral systems, especially in psycho-social spheres, to move away from standardized packages.
- *Operationalize “dual-age” intake:* Registration protocols should record both “age at recruitment” and “age at demobilization” to immediately identify the high-risk “grey zone” demographic for targeted programming.

## 2. YPS Practitioners

- *Demonstrate the added value of youth inclusion:* Document and disseminate examples where youth participation improves programme effectiveness and legitimacy in DDR-adjacent fields. Highlight benefits not only for young persons, but also for broader community dynamics.
- *Bridge the awareness gap:* Engage in joint trainings and case-based simulations to better understand the specific stages of DDR and collectively identify concrete entry points. In shared spaces, showcase the ways that YPS has moved beyond a purely normative framework by highlighting how the agenda has functioned as an analytical lens by multilateral organizations, governments, and civil society actors to better understand conflict dynamics and design more inclusive and effective peace, security and stabilization efforts.
- *Adopt adaptive and context-sensitive framing:* Where appropriate, frame youth-sensitive approaches through concepts such as social cohesion, community resilience, or intergenerational dialogue where appropriate.

## 3. Youth Actors and Networks

- *Leverage social networks for prevention:* Leverage access to informal networks to disrupt recruitment pathways, including through fact-checking, vetting opportunities, and disseminating credible counter-narratives.
- *Actively engage with harder-to-reach youth to facilitate meaningful inclusion:* Through access to informal networks and spaces, identify and engage marginalized and so-called higher-risk youth. Support their integration both within youth-led initiatives and in engagements with external actors to mitigate risks of tokenism, co-optation, and “youth-washing”.
- *Support identity transformation through physical spaces:* Maintain and expand youth-led spaces, such as youth centres, open to both youth ex-combatants and other young people to strengthen alternative forms of belonging and offer space for peer-networking and leadership development.

## 4. Donors

- *Mandate participatory design:* Require project proposals to document how young persons would inform the initial design and how they will be meaningfully included throughout the project cycle.

- *Compensate youth expertise:* Allocate dedicated funding for youth-led research, consultations, validation exercises and compensate young people for their time, travel and expertise when serving as researchers or evaluators.
- *Prevent tokenism and “youth-washing” by incentivizing inclusion of hard-to-reach youth:* Encourage or mandate targeting of high-risk and marginalized youth to avoid reinforcing incentives to select lower-risk beneficiaries for quicker results.
- *Adopt creative and qualitative success indicators:* Shift evaluation requirements beyond short-term outputs (i.e. number trained) towards indicators of sustained disengagement, behavioral change, and social cohesion.

## 5. Researchers and Future Field Studies

- *Hire youth-as-researchers and adopt youth-led methodologies:* Train young people, including ex-combatants, to participate in data collection and M&E to strengthen both data quality and ownership of findings.
- *Use snowball sampling to reach “invisible” populations:* Leverage young people’s access to informal youth networks to identify and reach often marginalized groups, such as self-demobilized young women and other hard-to-reach groups, and mitigate the influence of traditional gatekeepers.
- *Conduct peer group interviews:* Use peer group interviews and informal settings to encourage open and candid participation and prevent elite capture in formal focus groups often dominated by elite voices.
- *Align research with operational learning priorities:* Maintain regular contact with practitioners to identify emerging challenges and key gaps and ensure research can function as a continuous feedback mechanism to inform and adapt programming. Current pressing topics include:
  - The formal-informality dilemma: Researching how to recognize and support the “mushrooming” of informal youth-led initiatives without causing political co-option and elite capture. More documentation of the positive contributions and lessons learned from informal youth networks on disengagement and reintegration efforts would later allow for their scaling up, transfer, and adaptation across contexts.
  - Examining the role(s) of youth networks: Youth networks of diverse nature – religious, ethnic, professional – have been both spaces of recruitment into and disengagement from violent groups. Further research could explore what makes these networks more likely to encourage disengagement and how both community and external actors could support towards this end.

- Supporting identities in transition: Identifying sub-groups that are at most need of targeted social reintegration support by researching how different factors such as age of recruitment, duration of combatant life, and/or seniority in armed groups affect their social fluency. Further research could be conducted on the long-term effectiveness of incorporating “life skills” workshops into reintegration processes compared to economic livelihood-only approach.
- (Re)Mobilization in ongoing conflicts, such as Ukraine: Investigating why certain groups of youth voluntarily mobilize, while others pursue other pathways. Research could also explore why and how young persons mobilize – as well as remobilize – for reasons that may be different to their adult counterparts.

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