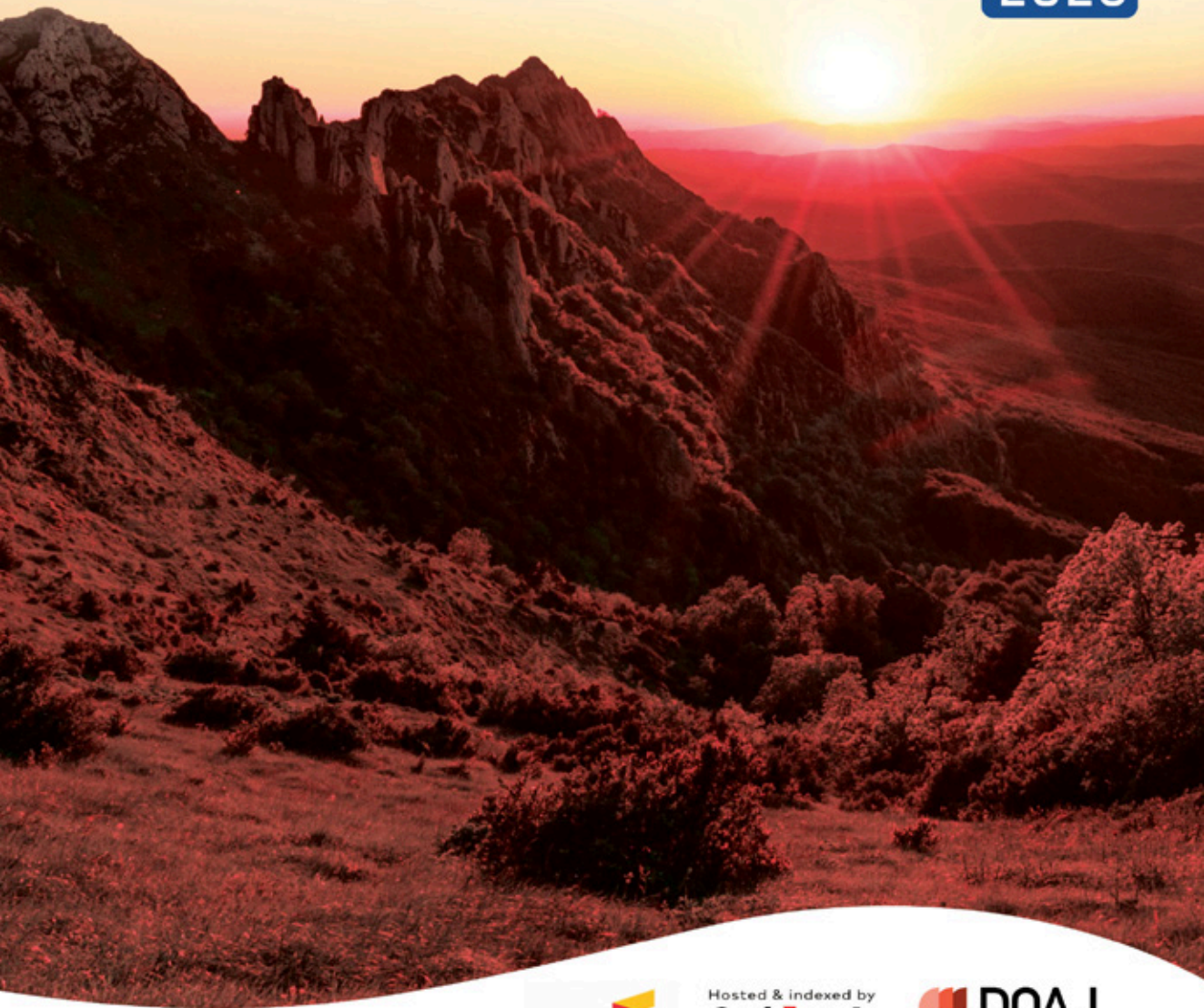


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## Everyday peace and youth agency in Zimbabwe: Grassroots peacebuilding practices among the youths in Harare and Bulawayo

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### Abstract

Zimbabwean youth are frequently portrayed as instruments of political violence, obscuring the everyday practices through which they negotiate division and sustain coexistence. This study examines how young people enact peace amid political polarisation, economic precarity and unresolved historical violence in Highfield, Harare, and Entumbane, Bulawayo. Grounded in everyday peace theory, positive peace and the peace–development nexus, it employs an interpretivist comparative case study design. Qualitative evidence was generated through focus group discussions, key informant interviews and sense-making workshops involving 64 purposively selected participants: 16 former ZANU PF Youth League members aged over 35, 16 current members, 12 workshop participants and 20 institutional informants representing government, political parties, civil society, faith-based organisations and regional bodies. Reflexive thematic analysis identifies interconnected practices of livelihood protection, inter-party coexistence, sport and artistic engagement, substance-abuse prevention, digital peace communication, disability inclusion and faith-based trust-building. These practices create spaces for negotiating difference and preventing conflict escalation, yet remain constrained by partisan resource allocation, economic insecurity, surveillance, inaccessible facilities, adult-dominated decision-making and tokenistic participation. Results reveal how everyday peace is differently conditioned by political mobilisation and livelihood pressures in Highfield and the unresolved legacy of Gukurahundi in Entumbane. Further, locally sustained coexistence does not necessarily constitute reconciliation or positive peace: practices that reduce immediate tensions may simultaneously accommodate unequal power relations. The study advances an understanding of youth agency as relational, politically situated and capable of reproducing as well as contesting exclusion. It challenges reductive perpetrator–peacebuilder binaries and demonstrates why grassroots peacebuilding cannot be assessed independently of the structures governing participation, livelihoods and historical recognition. Sustainable peace requires protected civic spaces, equitable opportunities, meaningful youth decision-making authority and credible survivor-centred processes of truth, memorialisation and restorative justice, particularly in communities where historical grievances remain unresolved and institutional trust remains fragile.

**Keywords:** Everyday peace, youth agency, grassroots peacebuilding, youth peace practices, social media.

## Introduction

Youths occupy a paradoxical position in Zimbabwe's political landscape: they are frequently implicated in political mobilisation, intimidation and violence, yet their everyday contributions to sustaining peaceful coexistence remain comparatively underexplored. Scholarship has extensively examined youth participation in electoral politics, partisan mobilisation and political violence (Maringira & Gukurume, 2022; Mwonzora & Helliker, 2020). Within the literature, young people emerge variously as voters and party activists (Oosterom, 2024), protesters and digitally connected political actors (Ndawana, 2023), participants in politically organised violence (Mwonzora & Helliker, 2020), and economic actors navigating precarious urban livelihoods (Gukurume, 2018). Although these perspectives illuminate the complex relationship between youth, political power and economic insecurity, they privilege visible forms of political participation and confrontation over the less conspicuous practices through which young people negotiate difference, contain tensions and sustain social relationships. The everyday production of peace remains insufficiently integrated into explanations of youth political agency in Zimbabwe.

This paper situates the study within Zimbabwe's evolving historical, political and socio-economic landscape, providing a critical examination of the structural and institutional conditions shaping youth agency and grassroots peacebuilding. It reviews relevant literature, with particular emphasis on the complex architecture of youth livelihoods in contemporary Zimbabwe and the ways in which these are embedded in historical legacies, economic precarity, political patronage and unequal power relations. Attention is directed towards how successive episodes of political violence, economic restructuring, unemployment and the informalisation of livelihoods have reconfigured young people's opportunities for socioeconomic participation, political engagement and community-level peacebuilding. The discussion further interrogates the contradictory positioning of young people as both participants in politically mediated structures and active agents capable of negotiating difference, fostering coexistence and resisting conflict escalation.

Consideration is given to the enduring consequences of historical violence, including Gukurahundi, and their implications for social trust, political belonging and reconciliation. Drawing on everyday peace theory, positive peace and the peace–development nexus, the paper establishes an integrated analytical foundation for examining how youth peacebuilding practices emerge,

operate and encounter constraints within historically differentiated urban environments. By connecting the political economy of youth livelihoods with the everyday negotiation of peace, the discussion moves beyond conventional representations of young people as either perpetrators or victims of violence and foregrounds their situated, relational and often contradictory agency in the pursuit of sustainable peace.

## **Background**

Despite growing scholarship on youth political participation, economic marginalisation and grassroots peacebuilding in Zimbabwe, the relationship between these dimensions remains insufficiently integrated. Existing studies have generated important insights into political violence and partisan incorporation (Maringira & Gukurume, 2022; Mwonzora & Helliker, 2020), the negotiated identities of party activists (Oosterom, 2024), youth livelihood strategies (Gukurume, 2018; Oosterom, 2019), and locally situated approaches to conflict transformation (Chivasa, 2022). What remains less clearly explained is how young people translate the contested political, economic and social positions into everyday practices of peace, particularly across communities shaped by different histories of violence and exclusion. Equally important is understanding whether such practices transform the conditions producing insecurity or merely enable coexistence within them. This constitutes the central empirical and theoretical problem addressed in the present study.

Three interrelated historical and structural conditions frame the present investigation: the politicisation of youth participation, the political economy of livelihoods and the persistence of unresolved historical violence. Their significance lies not simply in explaining young people's vulnerability to conflict, but in illuminating the circumstances under which they negotiate coexistence, exercise restraint, sustain relationships and pursue community-based peace initiatives. This perspective moves the analysis beyond the conventional association of youth with political violence towards a more critical examination of the everyday practices through which peace is produced, constrained and contested. It also establishes the central tension underpinning the study: young people may contribute to maintaining everyday peace while remaining embedded in political, economic and historical structures that obstruct its transformation into sustainable and inclusive peace.

Against this background, this paper examines everyday peace practices and youth agency in Zimbabwe, drawing on historical experiences and qualitative evidence from Highfield and Entumbane. Attention is given to young people participating in or interacting with political ruling-party youth structures, while incorporating perspectives from opposition-aligned and non-aligned participants, government institutions, civil society organisations, faith-based actors and regional institutions. Two interrelated research questions guide the investigation: (1) How do young people construct and practise everyday peace in politically polarised and economically precarious urban communities? (2) How do institutional arrangements, livelihood conditions and historical experiences enable, constrain or reshape these practices?

## **Literature Review**

The paper advances three interconnected contributions. First, it conceptualises youth peacebuilding as a materially situated practice, demonstrating why livelihood insecurity and unequal access to economic opportunities must be considered alongside interpersonal coexistence and conflict prevention. Second, it extends understandings of youth political agency by examining peace practices within and beyond ruling-party structures, thereby challenging the reduction of young people to a perpetrator–peacebuilder binary. Rather than treating political affiliation as a definitive indicator of violent or peaceful behaviour, the analysis approaches agency as relational, negotiated and potentially contradictory. Third, through a comparison of Highfield and Entumbane, it demonstrates the analytical importance of historical and geographical context in understanding the possibilities and limitations of grassroots peacebuilding. The central argument is that everyday peace constitutes an important but inherently fragile expression of youth agency: it can sustain coexistence and prevent conflict escalation without necessarily dismantling the political, economic and historical structures that perpetuate insecurity. Understanding this distinction is essential to explaining both the contributions and limitations of youth-led peacebuilding in Zimbabwe.

The analytical imbalance regarding youths' role in peacebuilding in Zimbabwe is largely pronounced in scholarship examining youth participation in political party structures. Maringira and Gukurume (2022) demonstrate how political mobilisation, patronage and intimidation have shaped the incorporation of young people into Zimbabwe's partisan political landscape. The 2008 presidential run-off elections remain a significant reference point, with Mwonzora and

Helliker (2020) documenting how political socialisation, material incentives and pressures to demonstrate partisan loyalty contributed to young people's involvement in electoral violence. Yet political incorporation does not necessarily eliminate individual agency or produce uniform political behaviour. Oosterom (2024) complicates conventional interpretations of ZANU-PF youth activism by demonstrating how young activists negotiate competing demands arising from party ideology, personal aspirations and socioeconomic circumstances. Similarly, opposition-aligned youths have also navigated political intimidation, exclusion and mobilisation within contested political environments (Kasiyano, 2025; LeBas, 2006). The experiences suggest that youth political identities are neither fixed nor reducible to institutional affiliation. Rather, they are continuously negotiated within unequal relationships of power, opportunity and belonging.

The political economy of youth participation further complicates the relationship. Persistent unemployment, informalisation and restricted access to economic opportunities have intensified young people's dependence on politically mediated livelihood networks (Gukurume, 2018; Oosterom, 2019). Economic vulnerability can create incentives for partisan mobilisation while simultaneously encouraging strategies of accommodation, restraint and negotiated coexistence. As Yingi (2023) observes, youth empowerment programmes may offer opportunities for socioeconomic advancement while reproducing political exclusion through selective resource allocation and limited participation in decision-making. This contradiction raises a fundamental question: how do young people sustain everyday peace when the institutions and economic relationships through which they pursue survival may also be reproducing political division? Addressing this question requires moving beyond interpretations that position young people exclusively as perpetrators of violence, victims of political manipulation or beneficiaries of institutional peacebuilding.

The everyday peace approach provides a productive analytical entry point into this problem. Rather than locating peace primarily in elite negotiations, formal agreements or institutional interventions, Mac Ginty (2014) directs attention towards ordinary practices through which individuals and communities manage insecurity, negotiate social boundaries and prevent conflict escalation. Everyday peace emerges through repeated acts of restraint, accommodation, coexistence and relational negotiation, often in settings where formal peacebuilding mechanisms remain inaccessible or politically contested. Mac Ginty (2021)

further conceptualises these practices as situated forms of agency through which people navigate the tensions of divided societies. Applied to Zimbabwe, this perspective shifts attention towards the neighbourhoods, markets, youth centres, sporting spaces, religious institutions and digital networks in which young people encounter political difference and negotiate the conditions of coexistence. Such an orientation complements Chivasa's (2022) emphasis on the significance of locally grounded relationships and community participation in conflict transformation.

Nevertheless, everyday coexistence should not be conflated with sustainable peace. Practices that prevent immediate confrontation may coexist with intimidation, political surveillance, economic exclusion and unresolved historical grievances. This distinction is particularly important in Zimbabwe, where the management of visible conflict does not necessarily transform the structural conditions sustaining vulnerability. Galtung's (1969) distinction between negative and positive peace offers a critical basis for examining this tension. Whereas negative peace concerns the absence of direct violence, positive peace requires attention to the structural inequalities and institutional arrangements that reproduce exclusion and insecurity. Accordingly, everyday peace practices must be examined not only for their capacity to sustain social relationships but also for the extent to which they challenge, accommodate or inadvertently reproduce unequal power relations. The peace–development relationship adds a further dimension: livelihood security may strengthen young people's capacity for independent action, yet development initiatives distributed through partisan networks can reinforce dependency and political control (Yingi, 2023).

The tensions are consequential when everyday peace is examined within and beyond political party youth structures. Economic empowerment initiatives, inter-party dialogue, sporting activities, youth-centre programmes and substance-abuse prevention campaigns may create opportunities for cooperation across political and social boundaries. However, their peacebuilding potential depends on how participation, resources and institutional authority are organised. Political affiliation may facilitate access to opportunities while simultaneously imposing expectations of loyalty and compliance (Oosterom, 2024). Similarly, digital platforms can expand opportunities for youth expression, civic mobilisation and peace communication while exposing participants to misinformation, surveillance and political sanction (Ndawana, 2023). Faith-based organisations also provide comparatively trusted spaces for dialogue,

relationship-building and community support, although their capacity to address entrenched political inequalities remains context-dependent (Ndlovu, 2025). The contradictions demonstrate why youth peacebuilding cannot be assessed solely through the existence of programmes or the apparent absence of violence. The critical issue is how young people exercise agency within institutional arrangements that simultaneously enable and constrain peaceful engagement.

The historical geography of Zimbabwe introduces another dimension that demands closer analytical attention. Although political polarisation and economic insecurity affect communities across the country, the meanings and possibilities of peace are shaped by distinct historical experiences. Highfield (Harare) provides a setting in which political mobilisation, precarious livelihoods and contested civic participation intersect (Kasiyano, 2025). Entumbane (Bulawayo) offers a contrasting context in which contemporary experiences of coexistence are also situated within Matabeleland's unresolved history of Gukurahundi. As Gusha (2019) demonstrates, the continuing significance of historical memory presents profound challenges for reconciliation, recognition and the rebuilding of trust. Comparing these urban settings, therefore, enables examination of how everyday peace practices operate under shared conditions of socioeconomic vulnerability but within different political and historical configurations. Crucially, it also raises the question of whether peaceful coexistence can constitute meaningful reconciliation where historical injustices remain insufficiently addressed.

The question of youth in Zimbabwe extends beyond chronological age to encompass historically constructed identities, contested political affiliations and unequal access to socioeconomic opportunities. Although Section 20 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe identifies young people as those aged 15–35 years (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013), broadly consistent with the African Youth Charter (African Union, 2006), this demographic classification offers only a partial understanding of youth experiences. Youth is also a socially negotiated and politically situated category, shaped by relationships of authority, economic dependency, institutional belonging and participation in public life. Oosterom (2024) demonstrates how youth political identities are negotiated within competing institutional and personal expectations, while Kasiyano (2025) situates youth participation within the contested political environment of urban Zimbabwe.

Accordingly, young people cannot be treated as a homogeneous political constituency. Their experiences differ across educational attainment, employment status, socio-economic position and political affiliation, encompassing students, unemployed graduates, informal-sector workers, ruling-party activists, opposition-aligned youths and politically non-aligned individuals. Gukurume (2018), for example, illustrates how precarious livelihoods shape the everyday experiences and economic strategies of urban youth. These distinctions are significant because opportunities for peacebuilding, political participation and independent action are unevenly distributed across youth constituencies.

The contemporary youth question is inseparable from Zimbabwe's political history. During the liberation struggle, young people occupied prominent positions in nationalist mobilisation and armed resistance, while independence invested youth with symbolic significance as participants in national reconstruction. However, subsequent political developments complicated this emancipatory representation. From the early 2000s, youth mobilisation became associated with partisan political competition, particularly through the National Youth Service and ruling-party youth structures. Examining the 2008 presidential run-off elections, for instance, Mwonzora and Helliker (2020) showed how political socialisation, coercive mobilisation and material incentives contributed to young people's participation in electoral violence. Related scholarship identifies the role of patronage, intimidation and partisan discipline in shaping youth political engagement (Maringira & Gukurume, 2022). Nevertheless, interpreting youth primarily through their association with political violence risks obscuring the diversity of their political experiences and everyday responses to insecurity. As Oosterom (2024) argues, participation in political party structures involves negotiations between political expectations, personal aspirations and socioeconomic realities. Youth political agency must, therefore, be understood as neither inherently violent nor necessarily emancipatory, but as contingent upon the institutional and material conditions within which it is exercised.

Economic restructuring has further transformed the conditions of youth participation. Recurrent economic crises, deindustrialisation and the contraction of formal employment opportunities intensified dependence on informal economic activities and politically mediated livelihood networks. Gukurume (2018) documents the strategies through which young Zimbabweans navigate economic environments, while Oosterom (2019) demonstrates how informal

livelihoods intersect with political relationships, social navigation and the management of risk. Economic insecurity represents more than a developmental challenge; it also shapes the opportunities, constraints and incentives associated with political mobilisation and community participation.

In high-density urban communities, unemployment, social inequality and limited opportunities for meaningful engagement have been associated with heightened vulnerability to violence and social instability (Zvaita & Kaye, 2023). Ndlovu (2025) further draws attention to the intersections between socioeconomic marginalisation, substance abuse and community-level violence. Yet national programmes intended to address these vulnerabilities may reproduce exclusion when access to resources is mediated by political affiliation. Yingi (2023) identifies partisan allocation, patronage and limited youth decision-making authority as persistent challenges within youth empowerment initiatives. The resulting contradiction is significant: institutions ostensibly established to promote youth development may simultaneously reinforce the dependencies and inequalities that constrain autonomous peacebuilding.

The political and economic dynamics are further complicated by Zimbabwe's differentiated histories of violence. In Matabeleland, particularly Bulawayo and its surrounding communities, contemporary understandings of peace remain entangled with the unresolved legacy of Gukurahundi. The violence and its enduring consequences continue to shape collective memory, political belonging, institutional trust and expectations of reconciliation. Gusha (2019) demonstrates the significance of historical memory in understanding the difficulties surrounding reconciliation in Zimbabwe. Within this context, peaceful coexistence cannot automatically be interpreted as the resolution of historical grievances. Everyday interactions may sustain neighbourhood relationships while underlying demands for acknowledgement, accountability and justice remain unresolved. This distinction is particularly relevant to Entumbane, where the meaning of peace must be examined against the wider historical experiences of Matabeleland rather than reduced to the immediate absence of political confrontation.

The comparison between Highfield in Harare and Entumbane in Bulawayo, therefore, provides an opportunity to examine how youth peace practices emerge within distinct but interconnected configurations of political power, economic insecurity and historical memory. Both communities are situated within broader conditions of urban socio-economic precarity, yet the

circumstances shaping everyday coexistence cannot be presumed identical. In Highfield, questions of partisan mobilisation, livelihood negotiation and civic participation provide an important context for understanding youth agency (Kasiyano, 2025). In Entumbane, these concerns intersect with the historical significance of Gukurahundi and continuing challenges of recognition and reconciliation (Gusha, 2019). These differences do not establish mutually exclusive experiences; rather, they provide a basis for investigating how particular political and historical conditions shape the meanings, possibilities and limitations of grassroots peacebuilding.

The peace–development nexus expressed in this paper extends the analysis by locating youth peacebuilding within the material conditions of everyday survival. Economic insecurity influences how young people participate in political organisations, negotiate social relationships and respond to opportunities for mobilisation. Research on Zimbabwe demonstrates that unstable livelihoods frequently intersect with political networks and relationships of dependency (Oosterom, 2019). Maringira and Gukurume (2022) similarly connect youth political mobilisation with patronage and the distribution of material opportunities, while Zvaita and Kaye (2023) identify economic exclusion as an important dimension of youth vulnerability in high-density urban communities. These relationships suggest that livelihood security is not merely an external condition affecting peacebuilding; it is integral to the circumstances under which young people exercise political and social agency.

Economic opportunities may strengthen young people's capacity to resist coercive mobilisation by reducing dependence on politically controlled resources. Productive engagement can also create shared interests and opportunities for cooperation across social and political divisions. However, the relationship between economic empowerment and peace is neither linear nor politically neutral. Yingi (2023) notes that youth development initiatives may reproduce partisan inequalities when opportunities are distributed through patronage networks. Under such circumstances, programmes ostensibly designed to strengthen youth autonomy can reinforce political dependency, exclusion and competition over scarce resources.

This contradiction highlights the importance of distinguishing the availability of development initiatives from their distributional and institutional characteristics. Livelihood programmes cannot be assumed to promote peace solely because they provide employment, training or financial assistance. Their

peacebuilding implications depend on who gains access, how beneficiaries are selected, whether participation is politically conditional and the extent to which young people influence programme design and implementation. Where resources are allocated equitably and participation is meaningful, development initiatives may strengthen the material foundations of positive peace. Selective allocation can intensify resentment and reproduce the inequalities that peacebuilding seeks to address.

The peace–development relationship also extends beyond employment and income generation. Substance abuse, limited recreational opportunities, and the deterioration of community infrastructure may intersect with economic insecurity to undermine social relationships. Ndlovu (2025) links youth violence in Zimbabwean high-density communities to broader socio-economic and public-health concerns, indicating the need to consider psychosocial support alongside livelihood interventions. Community facilities and youth organisations can provide settings for structured engagement, skills development and cooperation, although their effectiveness depends on accessibility, inclusiveness and institutional support (Chivasa, 2022).

Thus, the study conceptualises youth agency as materially situated and relational rather than uniformly autonomous or inherently resistant. Oosterom (2024) demonstrates that young people's political participation involves negotiating institutional expectations alongside personal aspirations, while Oosterom (2019) shows how livelihood strategies shape political navigation and everyday decision-making. Young people, therefore, tend to accommodate dominant political structures in one setting while promoting cooperation, exercising restraint or challenging exclusion in another. Such apparently contradictory practices do not necessarily indicate inconsistent political identities; they reflect the differentiated opportunities and constraints within which agency is exercised. Understanding grassroots peacebuilding requires attention to these negotiations rather than assigning fixed identities to young people as either agents of violence or agents of peace.

## **Theoretical and conceptual framework**

Understanding grassroots peacebuilding among young people in Zimbabwe requires an analytical framework capable of explaining not only how peace is practised but also how such practices are shaped, enabled and constrained by unequal political and socioeconomic relationships. The preceding discussion established that youth livelihoods, political participation and experiences of

insecurity are embedded within historically constituted structures of power. However, these conditions do not predetermine young people's responses to conflict. They also create circumstances in which individuals negotiate competing loyalties, maintain relationships across political divisions and develop locally situated mechanisms for managing tensions. To interrogate these processes, the study integrates the everyday peace approach (Mac Ginty, 2014, 2021), Galtung's (1969) distinction between negative and positive peace, and the peace–development nexus. These perspectives provide complementary explanations of the relationship between everyday social practices, structural inequalities and the possibilities of youth-led peacebuilding. Drawing on the distinction between theoretical explanation and conceptual operationalisation advanced by Miles and Huberman (1994), the study translates these perspectives into an analytical framework centred on youth peace practices, their institutional settings and the conditions influencing their sustainability.

### *Everyday peace as situated social practice*

The everyday peace approach offers a departure from conventional peacebuilding perspectives that privilege formal negotiations, institutional reconstruction and externally designed interventions. Mac Ginty (2014) argues that peace must also be understood through the ordinary practices by which individuals navigate conflict, manage social differences and sustain relationships within divided societies. Rather than assuming that peace emerges exclusively from institutional agreements or deliberate reconciliation initiatives, this perspective recognises the significance of routine social interactions in preventing tensions from escalating into violence. Subsequent elaborations emphasise the relational, context-dependent and often inconspicuous character of these practices (Mac Ginty, 2021; Ware & Ware, 2022).

Central to this approach is the proposition that everyday peace operates through practical forms of social negotiation rather than necessarily through explicit commitments to peacebuilding. Mac Ginty (2014) identifies avoidance, ambiguity, ritualised politeness, telling and blame deferral as mechanisms through which individuals manage potentially contentious encounters. Extending this understanding, Ware and Ware (2022) draw attention to practices such as interpreting social situations, shielding others, civility, reciprocity, solidarity and renunciation. Although these activities may appear insignificant when compared with formal peace agreements, their repetition can preserve relationships, reduce opportunities for confrontation and facilitate coexistence

under conditions of political uncertainty. Everyday peace is neither a singular intervention nor a definitive outcome; it is continuously negotiated through ordinary social conduct.

This understanding is particularly relevant to youth peacebuilding because young people's political and social relationships extend beyond formal organisations and institutional programmes. Markets, public transport spaces, sporting grounds, youth centres, churches and digital platforms constitute everyday environments in which political differences are encountered, negotiated and sometimes temporarily suspended. Such settings can facilitate cooperation among individuals whose political affiliations, economic interests or historical experiences might otherwise generate antagonism. Chivasa (2022) emphasises the importance of locally grounded participation and community relationships in Zimbabwean conflict transformation, while Machingura and Nicolson (2022) demonstrate the significance of faith-based institutions in facilitating community-level responses to political conflict. From this perspective, the analytical importance of youth peacebuilding lies not simply in participation in designated peace programmes but in the everyday interactions through which young people sustain or disrupt social relationships.

Nevertheless, the everyday peace approach requires critical application. The absence of open confrontation does not necessarily indicate the presence of trust, reconciliation or freedom from coercion. Mac Ginty (2021) cautions against romanticising local agency, while Ware and Ware (2022) demonstrate that apparently peaceful practices may conceal unequal power relationships. Avoidance, silence and accommodation can preserve immediate stability without transforming the conditions generating insecurity. In politically sensitive environments, individuals may refrain from confrontation because they fear exclusion, surveillance or retaliation rather than because underlying disagreements have been resolved. As Machingura and Nicolson (2022) suggest, the possibilities of grassroots conflict transformation in Zimbabwe are conditioned by wider political and institutional constraints. Everyday peace must be examined as an ambivalent social practice capable of expressing both agency and accommodation to domination.

For the present study, this distinction is fundamental. Young people may cooperate across partisan boundaries, participate in community initiatives or maintain neighbourhood relationships while simultaneously negotiating political pressures and unequal access to resources. Their actions may prevent

immediate conflict without necessarily challenging the institutions sustaining division. The everyday peace approach therefore provides a means of identifying and interpreting youth-led practices of coexistence while remaining attentive to their political limitations.

### *From everyday coexistence to positive peace*

The limitations of everyday peace become more apparent when considered alongside Galtung's (1969) distinction between negative and positive peace. Negative peace refers principally to the absence of direct violence, whereas positive peace concerns the transformation of structural conditions that reproduce inequality, deprivation and exclusion. This distinction shifts the analytical focus from whether violence is occurring to whether the underlying arrangements governing social relationships enable dignity, participation and equitable access to opportunities. As Turan (2026) argues, a more substantive understanding of positive peace requires attention to agency and the conditions under which individuals can participate meaningfully in shaping their social and political environments.

Integrating positive peace into the everyday peace approach enables a distinction between practices that manage immediate tensions and interventions capable of addressing their structural foundations. Sporting activities, inter-party dialogue and community gatherings may create opportunities for interaction and reduce interpersonal hostility. However, their transformative potential remains limited where young people continue to experience unemployment, political exclusion, discriminatory resource allocation or restricted decision-making authority. Evidence from Zimbabwean urban communities associates socioeconomic marginalisation and exclusion with heightened vulnerability to violence (Zvaita & Kaye, 2023). Similarly, Yingi (2023) identifies the limitations of youth empowerment initiatives characterised by political patronage and tokenistic participation. These findings suggest that everyday coexistence may be sustained within institutions that continue to reproduce structural inequalities.

The distinction also has implications for understanding historically embedded grievances. In communities affected by unresolved political violence, routine social interaction may coexist with enduring demands for acknowledgement, accountability and justice. Gusha (2019) demonstrates how memories of Gukurahundi continue to complicate reconciliation in Zimbabwe. Accordingly, the ability of individuals to coexist peacefully cannot be taken as evidence that

historical grievances have been resolved. Positive peace requires consideration of the institutional and relational conditions through which recognition, trust and justice might be pursued. The analytical task is therefore to establish whether everyday peace practices merely contain conflict or contribute to transforming the relationships and structures from which conflict emerges.

Importantly, negative and positive peace should not be treated as entirely separate empirical conditions. Everyday practices may provide the relational foundations necessary for more substantive transformation, even where structural inequalities persist. Repeated interaction can create opportunities for cooperation, mutual recognition and collective problem-solving. Such possibilities depend on whether these interactions are accompanied by institutional responsiveness, inclusive participation and equitable access to resources. The relationship between everyday and positive peace is contingent rather than automatic.

### *Conceptualising youth peace practices in Zimbabwe*

This study conceptualises *youth peace practices* as contextually situated actions through which young people negotiate political differences, sustain social relationships and prevent conflict escalation. Drawing on Mac Ginty's (2014, 2021) everyday peace approach, the framework distinguishes routine coexistence from substantive reconciliation and structural transformation. Peacebuilding is, therefore, assessed not merely through participation in community initiatives but through the relationships, opportunities and institutional conditions such participation produces.

Seven interconnected domains inform the analysis: livelihood protection, inter-party coexistence, sport and artistic engagement, substance-abuse prevention, digital communication, disability inclusion and faith-based trust-building. These domains capture the intersection of material survival, social interaction and political agency. Livelihood protection is significant because economic insecurity and politically mediated opportunities influence young people's autonomy and vulnerability to partisan mobilisation (Oosterom, 2019; Yingi, 2023). Inter-party coexistence encompasses informal dialogue, restraint and cooperation across political divisions, although such practices may reflect strategic accommodation rather than genuine reconciliation (Mac Ginty, 2014).

Sport, music and youth-centre activities provide opportunities for social interaction and non-violent expression, while substance-abuse prevention

connects peacebuilding with psychosocial wellbeing and community stability (Chivasa, 2022; Gukurume & Zikhali, 2025). Digital platforms similarly create opportunities for dialogue and civic participation, although surveillance, misinformation and political restrictions may constrain their peacebuilding potential (Ndawana, 2023). Disability inclusion foregrounds accessibility and meaningful participation, consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). Faith-based engagement offers additional possibilities for dialogue, counselling and rebuilding community relationships (Machingura & Nicolson, 2022).

**A**cross the above domains, four interacting conditions shape the possibilities of youth-led peacebuilding: material security, institutional inclusion, political freedom and historical recognition. These conditions connect everyday peace to Galtung's (1969) distinction between negative and positive peace, while recognising that peaceful coexistence may persist alongside structural inequality and unresolved historical grievances (Gusha, 2019).

**A**ppplied comparatively to Highfield and Entumbane, the framework examines how similar peace practices acquire different meanings under distinct political, socioeconomic and historical circumstances. Its central proposition is that youth-led everyday peace can sustain coexistence without necessarily transforming the structures that reproduce insecurity. Sustainable peace, therefore, depends not only on young people's everyday agency but also on equitable opportunities, meaningful participation, political freedoms and credible processes of historical recognition.

## **Methodology**

**B**uilding on the conceptualisation of youth peace practices as situated and relational, this study adopted an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative comparative case study design. Interpretivism enabled an examination of how participants constructed meanings around peace, political belonging and everyday agency, while the case study approach facilitated analysis within real-life sociopolitical contexts (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022; Yin, 2018). The study focused on Highfield, Harare, and Entumbane, Bulawayo, selected to explore how comparable conditions of urban socioeconomic precarity intersect with different political and historical experiences. Highfield provided a setting for examining livelihood insecurity and partisan mobilisation, whereas Entumbane offered insights into peacebuilding within the wider historical context of

Gukurahundi. The comparison sought analytical depth rather than statistical representativeness, recognising the internal diversity of both communities.

**P**urposive sampling was employed, resulting in 64 participants chosen with relevant experience of youth politics, community relations and peacebuilding, consistent with the information-rich selection principles discussed by Campbell et al. (2020). The sample comprised 16 former ZANU-PF Youth League members aged above 35, 16 current Youth League members, 12 participants in cross-departmental sense-making workshops and 20 key informants drawn from government, ruling and opposition parties, civil society, faith-based organisations and regional institutions. Former Youth League members provided retrospective perspectives rather than representing the current youth population. The wider participant selection incorporated opposition-aligned and politically non-aligned perspectives, allowing political affiliations and institutional experiences to be examined comparatively.

**D**ata were generated through focus group discussions, key informant interviews and sense-making workshops. Focus groups facilitated examination of shared experiences and competing interpretations, while interviews captured individual and institutional perspectives. The workshops provided opportunities to interrogate emerging interpretations. Using multiple methods, participant categories and study sites enabled comparison across accounts without treating agreement as automatic confirmation of validity (Nyumba et al., 2018).

**D**ata were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2019) approach to familiarisation, coding, theme development and interpretative refinement. The analysis was informed by sensitising concepts from everyday peace, positive peace and the peace–development nexus while remaining open to inductively developed themes, including adultocracy, allowance culture, negative inclusion, digital citizenship and disability-related exclusion. Contradictory accounts were retained to illuminate differences in political positioning, historical memory and institutional interests rather than being forced into consensus.

**P**articipation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Interviews were conducted privately, and identifying information was protected through confidential data handling and anonymous codes (P01–P64). Quotations were included only where consent and confidentiality safeguards permitted, with

locations indicated where disclosure did not compromise anonymity. Particular care was exercised when addressing Gukurahundi and partisan violence because recalling historical trauma and discussing politically sensitive experiences may expose participants to emotional or social risks (Baron & Young, 2022). Reflexive attention was maintained throughout data interpretation, recognising that political affiliation, perceived risks and institutional positioning could influence both participants' accounts and their interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2019). These safeguards supported a context-sensitive analysis of youth agency without assuming that any institutional or political account was inherently authoritative.

## Findings

The analysis identified six interconnected themes through which participants understood and described everyday peacebuilding in Highfield and Entumbane: livelihood protection, recreational and cultural engagement, substance-abuse prevention, digital participation, disability inclusion and faith-based trust-building, and the institutional and historical constraints on youth agency. Across these themes, peace was understood less as an abstract political ideal than as the practical ability to maintain livelihoods, preserve social relationships and manage differences without intimidation or violence. However, participants also described significant tensions between the pursuit of peaceful coexistence and the political, economic and institutional conditions governing their everyday lives.

### *Livelihood Security and the Negotiation of Peace*

Livelihood security emerged as a prominent concern in participants' accounts of youth peacebuilding. Economic opportunities were frequently associated with reduced vulnerability to political manipulation and greater capacity for constructive community participation. One participant explained:

*When young people are provided with viable business options, agricultural and other income-generating initiatives, they stay engaged productively and thus become less vulnerable to getting involved in violence. (P01)*

A participant from Bulawayo similarly observed:

*Inactivity and unemployment make young people vulnerable to recruitment in political factions. Employment and income-generating initiatives may thus lead to peace within communities. (P03)*

Nevertheless, participants distinguished the availability of livelihood programmes from equitable access to their benefits.

As P02 explained:

*Although livelihood programs are available, access to them may be politically selective. Young people unaffiliated with any influential political networks lack access to these opportunities. (P02)*

This concern was reinforced by P04, who argued that livelihood initiatives could promote peace only where opportunities were distributed transparently and equitably, including among politically non-aligned young people and those in rural communities.

Taken together, these accounts reveal a central tension: participants viewed economic participation as a potential foundation for peace yet regarded politically selective access to opportunities as a source of exclusion and dependency. Livelihood protection was consequently understood as both an economic necessity and a question of fairness in community relationships.

### *Sport, Arts and Youth Centres as Spaces of Coexistence*

Participants identified sporting activities, artistic expression and youth centres as important settings for interaction across political and social differences. Their accounts emphasised the value of shared activities in creating relationships that extended beyond partisan identities.

One participant observed:

*Football tournaments are bringing together young people having different political views. Playing together and interacting constantly makes them relate to each other as teammates and neighbours rather than opponents. (P05)*

Youth centres were similarly valued for providing opportunities for recreation, skills development and discussion. P06 described them as places where young people could engage in constructive activities and address concerns without confrontation. In Bulawayo, P07 referred to the city's youth centres as important spaces for learning and community participation. However, participants also raised concerns about the deterioration or loss of these facilities. P08 explained:

*If youth centres get destroyed or stop functioning, then young people do not have a safe place to meet and have to compete for space in the streets and markets. (P08)*

The findings indicate that participants associated peaceful coexistence with access to shared community infrastructure. They also suggest that the continued availability and accessibility of recreational spaces were considered important conditions for sustaining youth interaction.

### *Substance-abuse prevention and community stability*

Drug and substance abuse emerged as a concern extending beyond individual health to family relationships and community stability. Participants associated substance dependency with household conflict, economic insecurity and vulnerability to exploitation. P09 stated:

*Drug and substance abuse is threatening peace in families since addicted young people often become violent, steal household property and engage in conflict with relatives. (P09)*

Another participant connected substance use with broader conditions of unemployment and hopelessness:

*Hopelessness and unemployment are making some young people take to drugs. Addicted young people are becoming vulnerable to manipulation and involvement in political or criminal violence. (P10)*

Participants nevertheless questioned the adequacy of awareness campaigns implemented without complementary support. P11 argued:

*Anti-drug campaigns are important; however, awareness is not enough. Young people need rehabilitation services and other psychosocial support. (P11)*

Similarly, P12 identified sport, artistic activities, vocational training and income-generating projects as potentially constructive alternatives. The accounts position substance-abuse prevention within a broader understanding of community peace, in which psychosocial support, livelihood opportunities and structured participation were regarded as mutually reinforcing needs. These are participants' perceived relationships rather than evidence that substance use necessarily causes violence.

### *Digital communication and the contradictions of online peacebuilding*

Digital platforms were described as accessible spaces for peace messaging, community organisation and political expression. Participants particularly emphasised the relatively low cost of communicating through social media. P13 explained:

*WhatsApp and Facebook allow young people to share peace messages, organise community activities and voice their concerns without spending a lot of money. (P13)*

P14 referred to the #ThisFlag and #Tajamuka campaigns as examples of how digital communication could connect local grievances with wider audiences. Yet participants also identified risks associated with online participation. P15 expressed concern about rumours and misinformation, while P16 highlighted the fear of surveillance and political consequences:

*Some young people do not want to interact online since they are afraid of being monitored, persecuted or considered a security threat for criticising the institutions of power. (P16)*

Digital communication thus emerged as a contested space. Although participants recognised its potential to facilitate collective action and non-violent expression, they also described conditions that discouraged open engagement and complicated its use for peacebuilding.

### ***Disability Inclusion and Faith-Based Trust-Building***

Participants identified disability inclusion as an important, but insufficiently realised, dimension of community peacebuilding. Their accounts emphasised that participation could not be considered meaningful where physical and institutional barriers prevented young people with disabilities from accessing programmes or influencing decisions. As P17 observed:

*Young persons with disabilities are often excluded from participation in consultation processes and development programs; however, the decisions taken in them directly affect their lives. (P17)*

P18 questioned the inclusiveness of youth centres that could not accommodate people with physical disabilities, while P20 called for accessible venues and appropriate communication support. Faith-based organisations were described as another potential source of trust and community engagement. P21 explained:

*Young people are more likely to attend the discussion organised by the church since they consider it neutral and feel safe in voicing their concerns there. (P21)*

P22 similarly associated church-facilitated engagement with opportunities for people divided by political differences to interact around shared values. P23 highlighted counselling, livelihood support and community dialogue as additional contributions.

Together, these accounts suggest that participants associated inclusive peacebuilding with both accessible participation and trusted settings for discussing sensitive concerns. However, the perceived neutrality of faith-based spaces emerged as a participant assessment rather than an independently established institutional characteristic.

### *Institutional exclusion and unresolved historical violence*

Despite identifying various practices that could sustain coexistence, participants expressed concern about the limited authority granted to young people within formal decision-making processes. Adult-dominated institutions, symbolic participation and short-term material incentives were repeatedly described as obstacles to meaningful youth agency. P24 stated:

*There is too much tokenism now. You give youths some tokens, beer, money, but they are not allowed in the decision-making seat. (P24)*

This concern was echoed by P26:

*Young people are invited to discussions and public consultations to show their presence, but the important decisions are made before the meeting even takes place. (P26)*

P27 criticised participation driven primarily by transport allowances or food, while P28 emphasised the distinction between being present at public meetings and exercising influence over their outcomes. Historical grievances introduced a further dimension to these limitations. Participants discussing Gukurahundi described the destruction of memorial initiatives and the continuing difficulties surrounding acknowledgement and justice. P30 observed:

*People may coexist peacefully in their everyday lives, but sustainable reconciliation remains problematic because the violence of Gukurahundi cannot be talked about and its victims cannot receive justice. (P30)*

These accounts demonstrate that participants did not equate the absence of immediate confrontation with meaningful reconciliation. They distinguished everyday coexistence from political inclusion, institutional accountability and the resolution of historical grievances.

Overall, the results reveal that youth peacebuilding was understood through ordinary practices of economic cooperation, social interaction, communication and community support. Yet the accounts also expose the fragility of these practices where opportunities are politically mediated, participation is symbolic and historical injustices remain unresolved.

## Discussion

The findings challenge the dominant representation of Zimbabwean youth as instruments of partisan violence, a concern established in the literature. While Mwonzora and Helliker (2020) and Maringira and Gukurume (2022) document youth involvement in coercive political mobilisation, the present study revealed less visible practices through which young people negotiate difference and sustain coexistence. Livelihood cooperation, sporting activities, digital engagement and community dialogue demonstrate that political incorporation does not eliminate individual agency. Consistent with Oosterom's (2024) analysis of ZANU-PF youth activism, these findings position youth agency as relational, negotiated and contingent upon institutional circumstances. Importantly, peacebuilding and partisan participation are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Young people may accommodate political authority while maintaining relationships across partisan boundaries. The study, therefore, moves beyond the perpetrator–peacebuilder binary identified in the study, without romanticising youth as inherently peaceful actors.

Livelihood insecurity emerged as a defining condition of everyday peace, reinforcing the background's account of economic decline, informalisation and politically mediated survival. Gukurume (2018) and Oosterom (2019) demonstrate how Zimbabwean youth navigate precarious economic opportunities through informal networks and political relationships. Participants similarly associated productive employment with reduced vulnerability to manipulation yet identified partisan allocation as a source of exclusion. This contradiction supports Yingi's (2023) critique of patronage-driven empowerment and Maringira and Gukurume's (2022) analysis of material dependency in political mobilisation.

The findings deepen Galtung's (1969) distinction between negative and positive peace. Economic initiatives may reduce immediate vulnerability without transforming discriminatory institutions. Their peacebuilding significance, therefore, depends not simply on employment creation but on equitable access, political independence and meaningful participation. This extends the peace–development nexus developed in the theoretical framework: the governance and distribution of livelihood opportunities are as consequential for peace as the opportunities themselves.

Participants' accounts of sport, music, youth centres and faith-based engagement substantiate Mac Ginty's (2014, 2021) everyday peace approach, which

foregrounds routine interactions through which communities manage difference. Football tournaments and recreational activities enable young people to relate through shared interests rather than exclusively through partisan identities. The findings complement Chivasa's (2022) emphasis on locally grounded conflict transformation and Gukurume and Zikhali's (2025) examination of music as a medium of youth expression. However, the deterioration of youth facilities demonstrates that coexistence depends on accessible social infrastructure. Similarly, churches were perceived as trusted spaces for dialogue, consistent with Machingura and Nicolson's (2022) examination of faith-based conflict transformation. Such perceived neutrality should not, however, be mistaken for institutional independence. As Ware and Ware (2022) caution, everyday peace may accommodate unequal power relationships. Community spaces therefore contribute to peace conditionally, depending on accessibility, institutional autonomy and opportunities for meaningful interaction.

The identification of substance abuse as a peacebuilding concern extends the analysis beyond electoral violence to household stability and psychosocial wellbeing. Participants linked substance dependency with unemployment and community insecurity, echoing Ndlovu's (2025) discussion of youth vulnerability and public-health approaches. Their preference for rehabilitation, counselling and productive engagement reinforces Galtung's (1969) argument that sustainable peace requires addressing structural deprivation. These accounts indicate perceived relationships rather than establishing causality.

Digital participation reveals a comparable contradiction. Social media facilitated peace messaging, grievance articulation and community mobilisation, supporting Ndawana's (2023) analysis of digital peacebuilding in Zimbabwe. Yet misinformation, surveillance and fear of retaliation constrained expression. Digital connectivity expands opportunities for participation without necessarily guaranteeing political freedom. Extending Mac Ginty's (2014) framework, the findings demonstrate that everyday negotiations of peace occur through digital spaces whose possibilities remain shaped by political power.

Participants' criticism of adultocracy, allowances and symbolic consultation exposed the difference between institutional recognition and substantive youth authority. This reflects the background's discussion of unequal political participation and supports Yingi's (2023) critique of tokenistic empowerment. Young people attend consultations without influencing decisions, allowing institutions to reproduce established hierarchies under the appearance of

inclusion. Disability exclusion further challenges assumptions that community participation is inherently equitable. Inaccessible facilities and limited representation contradict the principles of accessibility and equal participation established by the United Nations (2006). Read alongside Oosterom (2024), these findings suggest that youth agency must be evaluated through actual decision-making influence rather than numerical participation. Inclusion without authority or accessibility risks legitimising the structures that constrain peacebuilding.

The Entumbane findings reinforce the background's argument that Zimbabwe's differentiated histories of violence shape contemporary understandings of peace. Participants' concerns about Gukurahundi, contested memorialisation and unresolved justice correspond with Gusha's (2019) examination of historical memory and reconciliation. Although everyday coexistence may persist, it does not establish that historical grievances have been resolved. This distinction brings Mac Ginty's (2014) everyday peace approach into critical dialogue with Galtung's (1969) positive peace framework. Routine interaction prevents confrontation while leaving historical injustice unaddressed. Compared with Highfield, where accounts foregrounded livelihood insecurity, partisan mobilisation and digital expression, Entumbane illuminated the significance of historical recognition. The differences are contextual rather than absolute. They demonstrate that grassroots peacebuilding cannot be understood independently of the historical conditions shaping trust and belonging.

Collectively, the findings substantiate the paper's central argument that youth-led everyday peace is materially grounded, relational and historically situated. They extend Mac Ginty's (2014, 2021) approach by demonstrating how livelihood governance, community infrastructure, digital participation and historical recognition condition everyday coexistence. Galtung's (1969) framework further explains why conflict avoidance does not necessarily constitute structural transformation. The study's principal contribution is to conceptualise youth peacebuilding as politically mediated agency that can simultaneously sustain coexistence and accommodate inequality. Sustainable peace requires equitable livelihoods, accessible community spaces, substantive youth decision-making authority, protected civic participation and credible, survivor-centred processes of historical acknowledgement and justice. Grassroots peacebuilding must, therefore, be assessed not only by its capacity to prevent immediate conflict but also by its potential to transform the conditions that make peace precarious.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrated that understanding youth peacebuilding in Zimbabwe requires moving beyond conventional representations of young people as either perpetrators of political violence or passive victims of socioeconomic and political marginalisation. Drawing on experiences from Highfield in Harare and Entumbane in Bulawayo, the study revealed that young people exercise situated and often contradictory forms of agency through which they negotiate political differences, sustain social relationships and seek to prevent conflict escalation. Livelihood cooperation, inter-party coexistence, sport and artistic engagement, substance-abuse prevention, digital communication, disability inclusion and faith-based initiatives emerged as important domains of everyday peace. Their significance lies in the opportunities they provide for constructive interaction within communities characterised by political polarisation, economic insecurity and historically embedded inequalities.

However, the findings establish a critical distinction between sustaining everyday coexistence and achieving substantive, sustainable peace. Although grassroots initiatives may reduce immediate tensions and preserve community relationships, they do not necessarily transform the conditions that generate insecurity. Unemployment, partisan resource allocation, political patronage, adult-dominated decision-making, tokenistic participation, surveillance and inaccessible community infrastructure continue to constrain youth agency. The contradictions demonstrate that participation in peacebuilding activities cannot be taken as evidence of empowerment or structural transformation. Indeed, practices that sustain coexistence may simultaneously accommodate unequal power relations, particularly where access to opportunities depends on political affiliation or institutional approval.

The comparative analysis further established the importance of historical context in understanding the meanings and limitations of grassroots peacebuilding. While livelihood insecurity, partisan mobilisation and contested civic participation provide important contexts for interpreting youth agency in Highfield, participants' accounts from Entumbane additionally foreground the enduring significance of Gukurahundi. The experiences illustrate how everyday coexistence may persist alongside unresolved demands for historical acknowledgement, memorialisation, accountability and justice. The absence of overt confrontation should not be mistaken for reconciliation, particularly where historical grievances continue to shape perceptions of institutional legitimacy and social trust.

The study made three interconnected contributions to scholarship. First, it extended the everyday peace perspective by demonstrating that grassroots peacebuilding is inseparable from the political economy of livelihoods and the institutional arrangements governing participation. Second, it advanced a relational understanding of youth agency, recognising that young people may negotiate, accommodate and challenge political power within different spheres of everyday life. Third, by bringing everyday peace into dialogue with positive peace and the peace–development nexus, it established that the transformative potential of local peace practices depends on whether they contribute to reducing structural exclusion rather than merely managing its immediate consequences. Everyday peace is, therefore, both a meaningful expression of youth agency and an inherently incomplete response to entrenched injustice.

The conclusions have important implications for policy and practice. Government institutions, political parties, local authorities, civil society and faith-based organisations should prioritise equitable and politically non-discriminatory livelihood opportunities, adequately resourced and accessible youth centres, rehabilitation and psychosocial support, and protected spaces for responsible digital and civic participation. More fundamentally, young people, including those with disabilities and those outside dominant political networks, must exercise substantive influence over programme design, resource allocation and decisions affecting their communities. In historically affected communities, grassroots initiatives should be complemented by credible, inclusive and survivor-centred processes of truth-telling, memorialisation, acknowledgement and justice.

Given its qualitative and context-specific design, the study does not claim that the identified practices necessarily produce measurable reductions in violence or that its findings represent all Zimbabwean youth. Future research may examine the longer-term outcomes of initiatives, compare additional urban and rural settings, and investigate how political affiliation, gender, disability and historical memory interact in shaping peacebuilding opportunities. Ultimately, the study argued that sustainable youth-led peacebuilding cannot be secured through community activities or symbolic inclusion alone. It requires institutional conditions that enable young people to convert everyday cooperation into meaningful social and political influence. The central challenge is, therefore, not simply to recognise young people as agents of peace, but to transform the relationships, institutions and historical conditions that determine whether their everyday efforts can contribute to a more inclusive, just and enduring peace.

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