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**In the shadows of governance: Exploring youth participation in local peacebuilding initiatives**

Juramie R. Rubia, Benny R. Rubia, Nancy E. Aranjuez\*

*Jose Rizal Memorial State University, Dapitan City, Zamboanga del Norte, Philippines*

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**ABSTRACT**

This study explored the lived experiences of youth engaged in local peacebuilding initiatives, focusing on their motivations, challenges, coping strategies, and aspirations within their communities. Guided by participatory and youth development frameworks, the research used a qualitative phenomenological design to capture authentic narratives from youth leaders and members across barangays. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed thematically, revealing nine major themes that reflected both empowering and constraining factors influencing youth peace engagement. Findings showed that youth view peacebuilding as a meaningful pathway to promote unity, reduce conflicts, and encourage prosocial behavior through activities such as sports, dialogue, community service, and advocacy campaigns. Despite these positive contributions, participants identified significant barriers, including limited resources, inadequate institutional support, participation fatigue, difficulty engaging marginalized youth, and generational gaps that affect sustained involvement. Nevertheless, youth demonstrated resilience by emphasizing inclusive participation, respectful dialogue, leadership development, and collaboration with stakeholders such as SK officials, LGUs, NGOs, schools, and the PNP. The findings support Social Development Theory, Positive Youth Development, Conflict Transformation, and Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasize the importance of social support and community environments. Overall, the study highlights the critical role of empowered youth in strengthening sustainable peace, justice, and inclusive community development.

\*Corresponding author: Nancy E. Aranjuez ✉ [nancyaranjuez@jrmsu.edu.ph](mailto:nancyaranjuez@jrmsu.edu.ph)

## INTRODUCTION

Youth peacebuilding in Zamboanga del Norte has steadily gained momentum, with young people actively serving as mediators, volunteers, and community organizers in their barangays. They have led peace caravans, facilitated dialogues, and supported grassroots initiatives aimed at reducing tensions arising from poverty, land disputes, and political or tribal divisions (UNDP, 2024; OPAPRU, 2023). Despite these contributions, youth peacebuilding efforts remain largely informal and underrecognized, often carried out with limited resources and minimal institutional support. While national policies promote youth participation, the actual roles of youth in rural peacebuilding contexts are often overlooked, and their lived experiences are rarely documented or integrated into formal peacebuilding strategies (Simangan, 2024; Ragandang, 2022). This disconnect raises concerns about the sustainability and inclusiveness of youth-led peace initiatives in provincial communities.

A significant gap exists in localized and in-depth research focusing on youth peacebuilders in rural provinces such as Zamboanga del Norte. Most existing studies have concentrated on post-conflict urban areas, such as Marawi and Metro Manila, where structured peace programs and external support are more accessible. Consequently, there is limited empirical evidence capturing how rural youth navigate structural barriers such as poverty, adult gatekeeping, political exclusion, cultural divisions, and inadequate institutional support (Almirol, 2020; OPAPRU, 2023). Furthermore, youth participation is often symbolic rather than substantive, with young people invited to activities but excluded from meaningful leadership and decision-making roles (Ragandang, 2022; Cagoco-Guam, 2021). This lack of documentation and scholarly attention creates a critical knowledge gap, preventing policymakers and local stakeholders from fully understanding the realities, challenges, and potential of youth-led peacebuilding in rural settings.

To address this gap, the study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach using semi-structured interviews with youth peacebuilders and community

members in selected barangays of Zamboanga del Norte. The research explored how youth became involved in peacebuilding, the challenges they encountered, and the extent of institutional support available to them. It also examined how youth participation shaped their leadership, sense of inclusion, and engagement with local governance structures. By documenting their lived experiences, this study provides context-specific insights that contribute to filling the existing research gap and offers evidence-based recommendations to strengthen youth participation, improve institutional support, and promote inclusive, grassroots-driven peacebuilding programs that recognize youth as key agents of sustainable peace.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design using the Descriptive Phenomenological Approach (DPA) to explore and interpret the lived experiences of youth peacebuilders.

Phenomenology focuses on understanding the shared meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Alipoyo, 2022), making it appropriate for examining youth engagement in peacebuilding. The study was conducted in selected barangays of Dapitan City and Dipolog City, Zamboanga del Norte, Mindanao, Philippines, where youth participation in peacebuilding has increased but remains largely undocumented and institutionally unsupported. Despite persistent social challenges such as poverty, political rivalries, and limited structural resources, youth leaders actively serve as volunteer mediators, cultural facilitators, and grassroots organizers, highlighting the importance of documenting their roles and contributions.

The participants consisted of ten (10) Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) Chairpersons and Councilors, with five participants each from Dapitan City and Dipolog City. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct involvement in peacebuilding initiatives, ensuring information-rich narratives. To ensure sufficient leadership experience, participants were

required to have served in an SK position for at least one year. Data were collected using a validated semi-structured interview guide covering leadership profile, lived experiences, challenges, contributions, and proposed interventions. Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis to ensure systematic and credible interpretation of the data.

Strict ethical protocols were observed throughout the study. Ethical clearance was obtained from the JRMSU Research Ethics Committee (REC), and informed consent was secured from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through pseudonyms, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. All data were securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to authorized personnel and will be safely destroyed after one year. As part of ethical reciprocity, a summary of the findings was shared with participating youth councils to support and strengthen their ongoing peacebuilding efforts.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of data gathered through in-depth interviews with youth participants actively engaged in local peacebuilding initiatives in Zamboanga del Norte.

Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, as cited by Alipoyo (2022), the findings were organized according to the study's statement of the problem, highlighting emergent themes that reflected the lived experiences, challenges, and contributions of youth in peacebuilding. As a descriptive phenomenological inquiry, the analysis emphasized the participants' authentic narratives through horizontalization, wherein each statement was initially treated with equal significance. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy, credibility, and preservation of meaning. Significant statements directly related to youth peacebuilding were identified, carefully reviewed, and clustered into meaningful units based on shared ideas

and recurring patterns, while redundant or irrelevant details were excluded. Through imaginative variation, the researcher examined the data from multiple perspectives and contextual dimensions to uncover deeper structural meanings. The resulting composite description synthesized the essence of youth engagement in peacebuilding, culminating in nine (9) emergent themes that addressed the study's sub-problems and illuminated the broader implications of youth participation in local governance and sustainable peace development.

### Live experiences of youth participating in local peacebuilding

The responses to the interview established the lived experiences of Youth Participating in Local Peacebuilding in their daily engagement with their work. Three emerging themes were discovered in the study, such as: Transformative Leadership, Relational Peacebuilding, and Youth Agency in Local Governance and Peace Architectures. The following terms were covered comprehensively below:

#### *Transformative leadership*

This theme deals with how youth leaders intentionally create inclusive spaces that uplift marginalized groups, especially out-of-school youth, and ensure they are not merely beneficiaries but active contributors to community peacebuilding. It reflects a shift away from tokenistic involvement toward meaningful participation where young people are empowered to voice concerns, co-plan activities, and take leadership roles. The theme illustrates how inclusive participation is nurtured through outreach, second-chance opportunities, safe spaces, and recognition of youth agency in shaping community decisions. Three significant statements strongly illustrate this theme. Participant 1 stated that:

We really encourage them to join, especially out-of-school youth their attention is diverted from doing something bad (P1:SS19).

This perspective highlights the inclusive and rehabilitative approach adopted by some educational

institutions in supporting vulnerable youth, particularly young mothers, by providing alternative learning opportunities that allow them to continue their education despite challenging circumstances. Another participant added that:

Those who got pregnant were given a chance to study every Saturday instead of just roaming around, they can focus on their studies (P2:SS33).

These responses support the theme by showing how youth leaders see inclusion not as optional but as a responsibility to ensure that vulnerable youth are given access, opportunities, and meaningful engagement. Other responses highlight the importance of accessible and inclusive programming. As mentioned by Participant 2, that:

Youth are now more involved...we go to each sitio...not only ball games but seminars and trainings aron ma-educate sila (P2:SS34).

This account underscores the practical challenges faced by youth leaders in engaging out-of-school youth and other marginalized groups, while also highlighting the importance of designing inclusive and interest-based activities to encourage participation. Participant 3 also stated that:

Where they are able to show where they are good at. Here with us, it's quite difficult to invite out-of-school youth or marginalized groups, especially for training and seminars. But when it's games like basketball or activities with prizes, that's when they join. So, to better include them and make them want to join, we also need to create activities where any of them can participate and show what they are good at (P3:SS59).

Youth participation becomes meaningful when communities remove structural barriers and allow them to shape programs (Mansour, 2021). Research shows that providing safe spaces fosters confidence and reduces disengagement among marginalized youth (Bello, 2022). Outreach-based and community-embedded interventions are especially effective for

out-of-school youth who have limited access to formal institutions (Patalinghug and Torres, 2023). Inclusive programming strengthens social cohesion by allowing youth to interact across social divides (Hassan and Lee, 2024). Furthermore, youth-led initiatives thrive when adults provide mentorship and shared decision-making authority, improving the sustainability of peace programs (Yim and Kim, 2025).

#### *Relational peacebuilding*

This theme deals with how youth peacebuilding is lived primarily as relationship-work and community-work rather than as abstract advocacy. For the SK leaders and youth, peace is something that happens in concrete spaces, KK assemblies, forums, sports courts, clean-up drives, and dialogues where young people are invited to speak, be heard, cooperate, and repair conflict. Peacebuilding here is not only the absence of violence; it becomes an ongoing practice of building trust, unity, and shared responsibility across youth, elders, and institutions. Through regular gatherings, joint projects, and safe spaces for dialogue, the barangay itself is reshaped into a more connected and caring community. The first cluster emphasizes formal and informal spaces where youth can safely express concerns and shape community decisions. Participant 4 noted that:

My first involvement is actually when I became a SK Chairperson... We conducted our first KK assembly... engaging them to voice out their concerns and making them part of a decision-making process like drafting our annual budget... There is a decision-making process safe space for them to input their insights about the community (P4: SS61).

Here, courts, tournaments, health symposiums, and clean-up drives become informal peace infrastructures accessible, attractive spaces where youth build discipline, solidarity, and alternative identities away from drugs, violence, and boredom. The third cluster underlines how sustained activities gradually deepen unity within and across generations. A youth leader observes that:

When youth are united, friendships and mutual understanding become stronger. Through involvement in activities, they get to know each other's attitudes and behaviors. (P1: SS5).

The role of elders was also highlighted as an important source of encouragement and validation for youth participation in peacebuilding activities. Participant 1 also stated that:

The elders are supportive. They even come to watch the activities. They feel happy seeing their children or grandchildren involved in these activities. (P1:SS12).

Studies on youth participation in local governance show that structured forums like councils and assemblies enhance young people's sense of belonging, political efficacy, and trust in institutions, especially when their inputs visibly shape budgets and policies (e.g., participatory budgeting and youth councils in local governments). Evidence from peacebuilding contexts indicates that dialogic spaces youth forums, intergroup dialogues, and school-community partnerships, reduce prejudice, improve conflict-management skills, and promote inclusive norms when adults act as supportive allies rather than gatekeepers. Research on community-based peace education further finds that when youth lead campaigns on bullying, discrimination, and safety, they not only gain skills but also shift peer cultures toward empathy and mutual respect.

#### *Youth agency*

The theme deals with how young people gradually gain space, recognition, and influence within barangay decision-making processes. It captures the realities of youth leaders and SK officials who actively negotiate for their voices to be heard, assert their roles in councils, and participate in governance structures. This theme highlights both the opportunities and limitations: while youth increasingly contribute ideas, initiate programs, and collaborate with barangay leaders, they are still often treated as junior partners rather than co-equals in major decisions.

The theme illustrates that youth agency is expanding but unevenly and depends heavily on adult gatekeeping, institutional support, and visible results of youth-led initiatives. The first cluster reveals that youth are allowed to participate in decision-making but not as equals, as seen in several key statements. One participant shared that:

Sa permiro pa lang e present sa jud sa council... wala mankay katungod nga ikaw lang ang magbuot. You must first present to the council... You don't have the right to decide alone. From the very beginning, everything must be presented to the council; you do not have the right to decide on your own (P2:SS32).

Emphasizing how approval still rests with adults, and youth decisions hinge on visible outcomes. Highlighting moments of genuine recognition. These statements collectively demonstrate that while youth increasingly participate in planning and deliberation, their authority remains conditional, dependent on adult approval, and restricted to certain domains. Explaining that representation is still incomplete and must be actively fought for. Another participant emphasized the difficulty of reaching certain youth groups, stating that:

There are hard-headed youth who still don't listen, no matter how you talk to them (P5: SS95).

Suggesting internal challenges in mobilizing collective youth voice. This indicates selective acceptance from leaders. These insights show that youth leaders navigate a complex governance environment where their voices are heard sporadically, filtered by adult priorities, and shaped by structural and cultural power dynamics. The third cluster emphasizes the assertiveness of youth despite governance constraints. A participant shared that:

Sometimes yes, sometimes not... but when we show dedication, leaders listen (P7: SS135).

Cabanes Ragandang (2022) stresses that youth inclusion enhances democratic legitimacy and local

problem-solving. Upadhyay (2020) found that youth participation strengthens transparency and responsiveness in community governance. Kern (2025), highlights that youth engagement in peace councils deepens intergroup trust and broadens civic collaboration. Valenzuela (2022), demonstrates that intergenerational governance models improve policy outcomes when youth voices are valued. UN-Select (2024), emphasizes that safe spaces for youth deliberation enhance accountability and foster participatory decision-making. These studies reinforce the emerging pattern in Zamboanga communities where youth are increasingly heard but not yet fully empowered as equal governance stakeholders.

### **Challenges encountered in sustaining their peacebuilding efforts**

#### *Resource constraints*

This theme deals with the persistent structural barriers that hinder youth peacebuilding, particularly chronic funding shortages, limited access to training and technical skills, and institutional gatekeeping in governance processes. Participants described how their initiatives often rely on personal sacrifice, improvisation, and volunteerism due to insufficient barangay and LGU support. Despite their motivation, the youth face an ecosystem where resources, recognition, and opportunities are unevenly distributed. These limitations not only affect the sustainability of peacebuilding programs but also influence how youth perceive their agency, capacity, and legitimacy within local governance. The lived experiences of the youth reveal how financial scarcity directly shapes their peacebuilding work. One participant emphasized collective coping, like:

We don't have big problems with resources because we help each other... if something is lacking, we find ways to continue (SS8, P1).

Others were more explicit about the constraints, highlighting how financial gaps also affect engagement. These significant statements show that youth leaders are compelled to compensate for

structural gaps through creativity, solidarity, and sometimes personal financial contribution, revealing a peacebuilding context shaped by precarity. A recurring concern is the lack of sustained training and mentorship needed to build peacebuilding competencies. One participant explained that:

For me, what is needed is skills training; there is still a lack of workshops and conflict resolution training (P4: SS76).

These statements collectively demonstrate how insufficient training infrastructure restricts youth from maximizing their leadership and conflict-resolution potential, thereby weakening the long-term impact of peace initiatives. Compounding resource and skills gaps is the institutional gatekeeping that limits youth participation in decision-making. As one participant lamented that,

At first, we present it to the council because you don't have the right to decide alone (P2:SS32).

Youth-led peace programs in low-resource contexts often rely on volunteerism, which leads to burnout and reduced program sustainability (Arias and Deeb, 2021). Similarly, inadequate training and mentorship undermine young leaders' confidence and technical capacity (Mukherjee, 2022).

Research in Southeast Asia shows that youths' contributions to peacebuilding are undervalued when adult-centric governance restricts decision-making access (Mansour and Abu-Nimer, 2021).

Limited digital and technical skills also hinder effective youth engagement, especially in rural communities (Patalinghug and Torres, 2023). Moreover, chronic underfunding disproportionately affects grassroots peacebuilding initiatives, making them dependent on sporadic LGU or NGO support (Alhada *et al.*, 2024).

#### *Socio-political barriers*

This theme deals with how youth peacebuilders navigate layers of intergenerational hierarchy, gendered

expectations, and political rivalries that shape their legitimacy and influence in community peace processes. Despite their commitment, many young leaders encounter adults who dismiss youth-led work as “just for fun,” elders who cling to traditional leadership norms, and political actors who use influence to override youth initiatives.

These barriers create a climate where young people must constantly prove their value, assert neutrality, and negotiate power dynamics that were never designed with youth participation in mind. As a result, peacebuilding becomes not only a community task but also a daily negotiation for recognition, respect, and equitable space. The participants consistently described how adult perceptions minimize youth contributions. One youth explained that:

Some are supportive, but others see it as not a priority... just youth activities... not knowing it has a big impact (P2: SS27).

This account illustrates how adult influence can result in inconsistent support for youth-led initiatives, often shaped by differing priorities and decision-making preferences. A third participant highlighted this concern, stating:

Not really... There are times when they also have their own plans, and they change ours. They support us, but not always; sometimes they change our plans (P3: SS48).

These statements show how adult attitudes ranging from trivializing youth work to micromanaging youth decisions create an environment where youth leadership is undervalued and constantly judged, forcing young peacebuilders to justify their efforts before gaining trust.

Gender norms further complicate how youth leaders are perceived and accepted. As one participant reflected:

As SK Chairperson... gender, culture, and local politics affect how people see me... older people still have traditional expectations (P5: SS89).

Studies show that adults often undervalue youth-led initiatives, perceiving them as lacking seriousness or capacity (Checkoway, 2020). Gender bias significantly affects young women’s legitimacy in leadership, particularly in male-dominated political environments (Mumtaz and Farooq, 2021). Cultural norms and hierarchical traditions also restrict youth influence, reinforcing adult-centered decision-making. Research further notes that youth peacebuilders often struggle to gain trust and recognition until they demonstrate visible results, mirroring the participants’ experiences (Hassan and Lee, 2023). In Southeast Asia, youth participation remains symbolic when elders retain decision-making authority and view youth as inexperienced (Escarlan and Javier, 2024).

#### *Participation fatigue*

This theme deals with the recurring struggle of peacebuilders to mobilize youth who are busy, disinterested, resistant, or “stubborn,” reflecting a pattern of participation fatigue in the community. While many young people demonstrate strong commitment, others remain disengaged due to competing responsibilities, generational shifts in lifestyle, lack of understanding of program goals, or personal preferences. These difficulties shape how youth leaders design their initiatives, requiring them to balance patience, creativity, and persistent outreach. The theme highlights that peacebuilding is not only about creating programs but also navigating complex youth behaviors, motivations, and barriers that influence engagement. Three significant statements illustrate how youth resistance directly challenges peacebuilding participation. The first participant shared that:

Some Youth don’t listen to us... We sometimes find it hard to handle them (P1: SS6).

Highlighting communication barriers and individual preferences. The third participant emphasized generational shifts, like:

Before, it was easy to call the youth... now it’s very hard, maybe because of technology; the youth have become more stubborn (P5: SS91).

These statements reveal that youth disengagement is not due to lack of interest alone but is rooted in autonomy, changing lifestyles, and shifting communication norms. Participants also emphasized structural barriers such as school, work, and limited time. One participant expressed that:

It is hard to call out youth because some are studying... virtual is not possible due to slow internet (P5: SS83).

Studies show that time poverty due to school or work significantly reduces participation in civic programs (Deane and Harcourt, 2021). Research on youth digital access in rural areas finds that weak connectivity limits involvement in virtual peacebuilding initiatives (Santos and Patalinghug, 2023). Findings from global youth civic engagement indicate that generational lifestyle shifts, including digital immersion and reduced community bonding, contribute to “participation fatigue” (Hassan and Lee, 2024). Meanwhile, youth resistance emerges when programs are not co-designed with them, reinforcing the need for participatory leadership (Lopez and Singh, 2020).

Finally, evidence shows that disengagement is higher when youth perceive activities as irrelevant or controlled by adults (Barrett and Trad, 2022).

### **Youth contribution and impact in promoting peace, justice, and inclusion**

#### *Youth empowerment*

This theme deals with how youth leaders intentionally create inclusive spaces that uplift marginalized groups, especially out-of-school youth, and ensure they are not merely beneficiaries but active contributors to community peacebuilding. It reflects a shift away from tokenistic involvement toward meaningful participation where young people are empowered to voice concerns, co-plan activities, and take leadership roles. The theme illustrates how inclusive participation is nurtured through outreach, second-chance opportunities, safe spaces, and recognition of youth agency in shaping community

decisions. Three significant statements strongly illustrate this theme. The first participant stated that:

We really encourage them to join, especially out-of-school youth their attention is diverted from doing something bad (P1: SS19).

This account highlights inclusive educational and engagement strategies that provide alternative pathways for marginalized youth, particularly young mothers and out-of-school youth, to remain involved in constructive community activities. Participant 2 also added that:

Those who got pregnant were given a chance to study every Saturday instead of just roaming around, they can focus on their studies (P2: SS33).

These responses support the theme by showing how youth leaders see inclusion not as optional but as a responsibility to ensure that vulnerable youth are given access, opportunities, and meaningful engagement. Three responses highlight the importance of accessible and inclusive programming. The first participant stated that:

Youth are now more involved we go to each sitio not only ball games but seminars and trainings aron ma-educate sila (P2: SS34).

Youth participation becomes meaningful when communities remove structural barriers and allow them to shape programs (Mansour, 2021). Research shows that providing safe spaces fosters confidence and reduces disengagement among marginalized youth (Bello, 2022). Outreach-based and community-embedded interventions are especially effective for out-of-school youth who have limited access to formal institutions (Patalinghug and Torres, 2023). Inclusive programming strengthens social cohesion by allowing youth to interact across social divides (Hassan and Lee, 2024). Furthermore, youth-led initiatives thrive when adults provide mentorship and shared decision-making authority, improving the sustainability of peace programs (Yim and Kim, 2025).

*Pro-social relations*

This theme deals with how youth peacebuilders cultivate pro-social behaviors such as cooperation, empathy, mutual respect, and non-violent conflict resolution while strengthening peaceful relations in their communities. Through sports events, youth forums, mediations, leadership trainings, and anti-drug initiatives, they actively divert young people from risk behaviors and instead channel their energy toward constructive activities. The theme highlights peacebuilding not merely as preventing violence, but as promoting positive socialization, healthy communication, and inclusive participation that improve how youth relate to each other and to adults. Youth peacebuilders consistently emphasized structured dialogue and mediation as foundational practices for resolving tensions. One participant shared that:

I organized a dialogue between rival youth groups, which led to a public apology and later collaboration in a sports event (P2: SS24).

This shows how open dialogue transforms animosity into cooperation. This statement affirms that structured, enjoyable, and physically active programs prevent risky behaviors while strengthening social bonds among youth. Youth also foster peaceful relations by building safe spaces for discussion, learning, and collective action. One participant described that:

We organized youth forums like KK assemblies to discuss issues like bullying, discrimination, clean-up drives, tree growing, arts and sports events (P4: SS71).

Youth mediation programs have been shown to strengthen empathy and reduce youth aggression (Harris and Holte, 2021). Sports-based peace interventions also improve discipline, teamwork, and conflict-management skills (Gadai *et al.*, 2022). Community-based youth forums increase civic engagement and reduce intergroup tensions through shared problem-solving (Al-Abed and McEvoy,

2020). Awareness campaigns on drugs and risky behaviors measurably reduce substance-use intentions among adolescents (Santos and del Mundo, 2023). Moreover, leadership training for youth enhances cooperation, respect, and peaceful communication within peer groups (Kilonzo and Munene, 2024). Together, these findings affirm that structured youth programming fosters pro-social behaviors and peaceful relations.

*Systemic peacebuilding*

This theme deals with the youth's long-term vision for a systemic, sustainable, and community-embedded approach to peacebuilding. Rather than limiting peace efforts to isolated events, participants imagine a future where peace leadership is institutionalized, multi-sectoral, and deeply rooted in local governance structures. Youth envision programs that extend beyond one-time activities programs that include leadership camps, mentorships, community projects, and follow-through mechanisms that produce lasting behavioral, relational, and structural transformation. Their perspectives reflect a desire for continuity, collaboration, and a whole-of-society approach that embeds peacebuilding into schools, SK governance, NGOs, families, and LGUs, ultimately creating resilient and empowered youth who lead and sustain peace in their communities.

The first cluster highlights how youth imagine structured, multi-stakeholder programs designed for long-term peace formation. One participant emphasized a comprehensive model stated that:

I would like to do a peace leadership camp for youth with follow-up community projects and mentorships to strengthen unity and youth participation in local peacebuilding initiatives (P2: SS37).

This shows a desire for continuity beyond a single training. The third participant reflects that:

If I had the chance to design a youth peacebuilding program it would focus on education, dialogue, and community action... and include workshops on

communication, teamwork, and emotional intelligence (P3: SS57).

These illustrate that their ideal peace programs are holistic, developmental, and multi-sectoral, emphasizing skills, unity, mentorship, and inter-agency support, aligning with a systemic peace impact. The second cluster shows how youth view education as the bedrock of systemic peace.

One participant emphasizes that peace formation begins early, For me, ma'am, the youth must be already guided in school... that is where they are developed as they grow up (P1: SS18).

This statement underscores the importance of a collaborative, multi-sectoral approach to youth peacebuilding, emphasizing shared responsibility among educational institutions, youth councils, civil society, and local governments. Another participant proposed a shared educational ecosystem, stating that:

Schools can teach peace values early, SKs can organize youth programs, NGOs can train and mentor us, and LGUs can give funding and support for our projects (P7: SS138).

Multi-sectoral youth peace programs significantly increase long-term resilience and civic engagement (Akram and Watson, 2021). School-based peace education is shown to foster empathy, conflict resolution skills, and community stewardship among youth (Rahman and Lopez, 2022). Research also demonstrates that mentorship-based leadership programs enhance youths' capacity for social transformation (Santos and Hodge, 2023). Cross-sector partnerships between LGUs, NGOs, and youth councils improve accountability and program continuity (Villanueva and Park, 2024). Moreover, sustained youth participation has been linked to measurable reductions in community tensions and increased collective efficacy (Hammoud and Rivera, 2020). These studies validate the youths' insight that long-term peace requires systemic, coordinated interventions.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study revealed that youth participation in local peacebuilding is shaped by a complex interaction of structural constraints, interpersonal dynamics, and evolving community expectations. Across the nine emergent themes, young peacebuilders demonstrated that while youth-led initiatives foster unity, cooperation, and positive behavioral change, persistent barriers, such as limited resources, low engagement, resistance from some youth and adults, and inconsistent inclusion, continue to restrict the full exercise of youth leadership. Although youth emerged as capable agents of change, their efforts were significantly influenced by institutional support, socio-economic realities, and prevailing cultural norms, underscoring the need for enabling environments that genuinely sustain and legitimize youth participation in governance and community peace processes.

The results were strongly anchored in relevant theoretical frameworks. Positive Youth Development Theory explained how structured activities such as sports, leadership training, and positive role-modeling redirected youth toward prosocial engagement. Youth Participatory Governance Theory clarified how shared decision-making, dialogues, and team-building activities reduced tensions and strengthened cooperation. Structural Violence Theory illuminated how unequal access to opportunities and institutional support constrained youth initiatives, while Labeling Theory emphasized the importance of mediation, active listening, and mutual respect in transforming conflict. Collectively, these frameworks affirmed that youth peacebuilding is a systemic and relational process shaped by broader social structures, institutional arrangements, and power dynamics rather than by individual effort alone.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that peacebuilding efforts move beyond symbolic youth involvement and institutionalize inclusive, participatory, and well-resourced mechanisms for

engagement. The Philippine National Police (PNP), in partnership with the Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) and barangay leaders, may establish a Youth Peace and Safety Desk to provide mentorship and conflict mediation training; the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) may mandate the creation of a dedicated Youth Peacebuilding Support Fund in all LGUs; and local governments may institutionalize Youth Inclusion and Leadership Programs to ensure consistent youth representation in governance. The academe may integrate peace education and conflict-resolution training into the curriculum, while multi-sector stakeholders (PNP-DILG-LGU-Academe) may collaboratively implement re-engagement initiatives targeting marginalized youth. Furthermore, institutionalizing intergenerational peace dialogues at the provincial level can address gender bias, political tensions, and adult–youth disconnect, thereby strengthening transparency, social cohesion, and the long-term sustainability of local peacebuilding efforts.

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