

SMEs as Agents of Peace and Security: Insights from the 2023 YouthConnekt Africa Summit

Darlene K Mutalemwa

Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mzumbe University, Dar es Salaam Campus
College, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

Email: darlene.mutalemwa@mu.ac.tz

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9720-4971>

Kennedy Walusala

Founder, Multifunctional Youth Forum, Nairobi, Kenya

Email: walusala@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study examines the potential of youth-led Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to contribute significantly to Africa's peace and security agenda. Drawing on insights from the 2023 YouthConnekt Africa Summit, the paper highlights the critical role that these enterprises can play in fostering peaceful engagement and addressing the root causes of conflict. By investing in youth leadership capacity, supporting youth-led initiatives, and creating safe spaces for dialogue, governments and stakeholders can leverage on the power of youth-led SMEs to promote positive peacebuilding outcomes. The study further identifies key areas for engagement, including contextual specificity, understanding the root causes of threats and opportunities, going beyond tokenism, and implementing comprehensive national action plans on youth, peace, and security. While youth-led SMEs offer a promising avenue for peacebuilding. Further research is needed to understand their impact and develop effective strategies for supporting their growth and success.

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1. Introduction

Despite the dominance of youth-led SMEs in Africa's business landscape, making up 95% of registered businesses and contributing roughly half of the sub-Saharan's Gross Domestic Product (World Economic Forum 2023), these firms are navigating a complex and challenging landscape with resilience and determination. Africa is plagued with a variety of threats to peace and security, including political and electoral problems, climate change and the knock-on effects on food insecurity, violent extremism, gender inequalities, refugees and humanitarian crises, among other issues. The persistent lack of effective leadership, exemplified by tyrants and entrenched retrogressive divisions along ethnic, tribal and religious lines, remains a thorny issue at the core of the conflict and is compounded by the conflicts, which are becoming more complex and volatile because of the rise of conflict entrepreneurs and geopolitical dynamics through proxy wars and proxy free-for-alls (African Union, 2020a).

These recurring cycles constitute a severe threat to the continent's stability at the national and regional levels. They have also undermined the continent's economic potential by failing to address old injustices and exclusions, systematic and persistent marginalisation and inequalities. Inappropriate political and monetary interventions by member states have stifled human development and the promotion of peace. Young people lie at the heart of development delays and conflicts as they enter economies that cannot accommodate and sustain them and into political environments that have failed to create an enabling environment for their full human potential to be realised. This makes them more susceptible to factors that imperil peace and security. (African Union, 2020a; African Union, 2020b, African Union Commission, 2020).

2.Literature Review

Existing peacebuilding frameworks on Business for Peace (Joseph et al., 2023) have tended to portray the role of businesses towards peacebuilding through specific roles of multinational corporations (MNEs) vis-à-vis local firms. Discourses on research reliant on peacebuilding rely strongly on the role of MNEs rather than local indigenous SMEs, the latter absent both theoretically and empirically (Kanashiro and Starik, 2016; Kolk and Lenfant, 2012). Little is known about their specificities and the unique ways Indigenous SMEs might contribute to peacebuilding efforts in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. This hiatus has been noted by researchers, including Barkemeyer and Miklian (2019) and Ganson and Hoelscher (2021).

The presumed peacebuilding role of SMEs is coming under greater scrutiny because it is based on the tenet that 'poverty drives conflict' (Wafula, 2017) and that economic development leads to peace based primarily on large-scale economic trends (World Bank 2018). However, studies find that the localised economic impacts of SMEs might not be sufficient for enduring peace (Joseph et al., 2021, 2022; World Bank, 2018). Economic contributions must be complemented by social policies promoting local and national peace for durable peace (World Bank, 2018). There are growing calls for non-business donations (such as social development projects) to be the main drivers of peacebuilding outcomes (Ganson and Hoelscher 2021).

Social contributions are undeniably crucial for peacebuilding at the community level, but economic contributions of youth-led SMEs also play a vital role and should be noticed (Wafula,

2017). These firms are characterised by interventions that empower communities, support them financially, develop their capabilities, and decentralise decision-making authority (Joseph et al., 2020; World Bank, 2018). Social contributions hold the advantage of strengthening intergroup relations by diminishing prejudice and fostering peace (Wafula 2017).

However, not all SMEs contribute positively. In development contexts, most SMEs cater to basic needs (Mutalemwa, 2015). Peacebuilding effects are likely only felt by a few SMEs more oriented towards growth (Joseph et al., 2019a, 2019b). Conflict zones impose high costs on the expansion of these firms (World Bank, 2018). The social contributions of SMEs are likely to be less genuine than claimed. There is a risk of these firms overstating their social and environmental impact for investor appeal. Operating in an illegal environment, they can engage in activities that worsen poverty, conflict and social fragmentation, for instance, by violating workers' rights, engaging in human trafficking, and polluting the environment.

The level of formalisation and compliance with SMEs' legal procedures have a crucial role in whether they impact peacebuilding activities. SMEs operating in conflict settings play a vital role in whether they impact peacebuilding activities through the level of their formalisation and compliance with legal procedures. Unlike Multinational Enterprises (MNEs), which can move their operations and lobby governments to change national laws, SMEs cannot operate outside the location in which they were established (Mutalemwa, 2015). Since legal systems and bureaucracy are often corrupt in developing environments, it is unsurprising that informal actors do not want to formalise their operations (Mutalemwa, 2015; Wafula, 2017; Mutalemwa, 2024). The formalisation process might be detrimental if enterprises revert to informality when the costs of higher tax responsibilities outweigh the perceived benefits. Entrepreneurs often view informality as a more streamlined approach to business, believing that the benefits of formalisation may only sometimes justify the associated costs. Additionally, a decline in trust in institutions and a general erosion of faith in law and order, coupled with the inability of public authorities to fulfil their regulatory roles, can contribute to a rise in informality (Mutalemwa 2015; Mutalemwa 2024)

Building on the existing literature (Naude, 2007), six dimensions seem especially relevant to analysing the peacebuilding role of SMEs. First, the legacy of conflict creates risks that SMEs might face, such as renewed violence or corruption. Identifying threats allows focused support for peaceful and productive firms. Second, institution-building in post-conflict settings is challenging. In some cases, reforms are not even superficial. Moreover, creating institutions can generate uncertainty that discourages entrepreneurs and those who support them. Researching how institutions and entrepreneurship develop simultaneously is critical to advancing peace through SMEs. Third, war undermines social networks and displaces entrepreneurs, especially minorities and those with connections abroad. Peacebuilding support for SME development should focus on limiting key personnel's overseas migration, drawing on diaspora resources for finance and human capital, encouraging skilled immigration, improving conditions for minorities and immigrants, and helping SMEs find markets and distribute their products. This encompasses investment in infrastructure, support for regional trade and export promotion, and building on or even formalising existing, informal cross-border trade. Fifth, entrepreneurs in post-conflict zones have distinct educational needs, and more resources should be dedicated to programmes that support this mix of general skills with the organisational and management knowledge needed for growth – especially in the case of traditionally family-run businesses. More significant research is also

required about the financial needs of SMEs in fragile states: the relationship between skills and access to finance, requirements of start-up capital, context-relevant financial instruments, and support for research, development and investment in high-tech ventures. Lastly, a ‘developmental state’ approach is required, meaning that the government supports business development, provides inputs for SME production, such as training and infrastructural requirements, and decentralises economic management and decision-making.

This viewpoint explores best practices in youth participation within the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda, specifically focusing on how these practices can inform the role of youth-led SMEs in peace and security efforts.

3. Methodology

Research Design and Approach

This study employed a qualitative research design, precisely a case study approach (Priya, 2021), to explore the potential of youth-led SMEs in contributing to peace and security in Africa. The case study focused on the insights shared by panelists at the "Youth Building Peace" side event during the 2023 YouthConnekt Africa Summit.

YouthConnekt was inspired by the visionary leadership of Paul Kagame, President of the Republic of Rwanda, who sought to create a government-led platform for young people to contribute to policy dialogues, co-designing and informing decisions on the investments and programs to empower them. In 2012, for the first time, the YouthConnekt platform convened young people, civil society, development partners, and the private sector to deliver a nationwide innovation and entrepreneurship challenge and a Meet the President Dialogue, both efforts which since birthed many new initiatives co-created by young people and various stakeholders. In 2017, the Government of Rwanda, in partnership with UNDP and UNCTAD, organised the first YouthConnekt Africa Summit hosted by H.E. Paul Kagame, President of the Republic of Rwanda. Subsequently, the summit has become an annual occurrence. The 2023 YouthConnekt Africa Summit took place from December 8th to 12th, 2023, in Nairobi, Kenya and brought together over 20,000 young people, policymakers, industry leaders, and donors. The theme of the Summit was "Youth Innovating a Borderless African Renaissance," and it provided a platform for young people to gain skills and knowledge and connect with potential collaborators.

Data Collection

The specific data for this paper comes from a side event titled "Youth Building Peace: Highlighting Best Practices in Youth, Peace, and Security," held on December 10th, 2023, and co-organized by ACCORD and the ICGLR Youth Forum. The event featured a panel discussion with young peacebuilders across Africa, including Ms Audrine Faith Otieno, Chair of Peace and Security at the ICGLR Youth Forum (Kenya); Mr Eddy Yav, Youth, Peace and Security Focal Point for the Office of the President (Democratic Republic of the Congo); Mr Adeniran Rafiu Lawal, Team Leader for Building Blocks for Peace Foundation (Nigeria); Dr Brenda Jessica Tibamwenda, Office of the National Chairperson (Uganda); Mr Sam Ogwal, IGAD Youth Envoy (Uganda); Mr

Elmut Mammadov, Non-Aligned Movement Youth Organization (Azerbaijan); Ms Sara Sharaf, Executive Committee member, ICGLR RYF (Republic of Sudan).

Data Analysis

The data collected from the panel discussion was analysed using thematic analysis. Key themes were identified and coded, allowing for a systematic examination of the insights shared by the panelists. The study focused on understanding how these themes related to the potential of youth-led SMEs to contribute to peace and security.

4. Key Findings and Discussion

The opening segment of the dialogue featured remarks from Ms Rachel Racheteo Kombela of the Republic of Congo and the First Vice President of ICGLR RYF. In her address, she stated, *“Today, more than 1.8 billion people aged 10 to 24 comprise the largest generation of young people in history, with Africa having the world's highest youth population. This means that there can be no peace and security without the participation of young people, and there can be no development without peace. We young people are an excellent asset for working towards long-term peace and economic success, but we must struggle to ensure that inclusive policies are implemented.”*

Ms. Kombela also highlighted that African States must find measures to improve the representation of young people in peace negotiations and implementation by (i) involving young people and taking their perspectives into account in decision-making processes, from talks to peace treaties to violence prevention. (ii) ensuring the safety of young citizens' lives and fundamental rights and pursuing investigations and prosecutions against those who commit crimes against them. (iii) supporting young people in preventing violence and promoting a culture of tolerance and intercultural conversation. (iv) involving young people in formulating peacebuilding initiatives by local actors and UN entities during and after conflict. (v) Investing in young people affected by armed conflicts by establishing jobs, implementing inclusive employment policies, and promoting a peace culture via education.

Common themes emerged from the panel discussions on YPS. These themes, identified in the dialogue, will be explored in the following sections. We will focus on how these insights translate into opportunities and implications for youth-led SMEs to contribute to peace and security.

The importance of local context

Youth-led SMEs must prioritise understanding their specific local environment above all else. A one-size-fits-all approach will not work. Failure to consider a region's unique social, economic and political conditions (for example, Uganda versus Azerbaijan) means that firms created will be irrelevant and unsustainable in the long term. Instead, by immersing themselves in the local environment, young entrepreneurs can develop businesses that genuinely speak to their communities, encouraging a sense of ownership and control within society that will lead to a calmer, more secure society. Young entrepreneurs could use a deliberate assessment of their localities' specific challenges and opportunities to become change agents and help promote peace from the bottom up.

Addressing the root causes of threats to youth, peace, and security:

The discussion emphasised the need to understand what puts young people at risk – poverty, inequality, discrimination, violence, lack of access to education and opportunity – as well as taking proactive and comprehensive measures to tackle both the immediate effects of these vulnerabilities and their underlying causes. This thinking is relevant to youth-led SMEs, and recognising the root causes of threats to peace and security is just as essential. The meeting underscored that factors such as poverty, lack of opportunity, discrimination and lack of education can drive young people towards violence and instability. The relevance of this perspective to youth entrepreneurs is also clear: their businesses serve as formidable instruments to address these issues. SMEs can help to create jobs, foster more inclusive practices, and promote education or skill development – all of which can provide young people with a positive alternative, building their empowerment and helping to create a more peaceful environment.

Addressing the root causes that contribute to youth promoting peace and security.

The meeting highlighted a shift in the perception of the youth primarily as vulnerable to thinking about them as agents of peace and security while recognising that young people's positive contribution depends on a range of factors related to their access to education and skill development, their social inclusion, and meaningful participation in decision-making. Practitioners working with youth-led SMEs shared their experiences that training and skills alone are insufficient for vulnerable youth to flourish; a just future requires addressing systemic discrimination by providing tailored vocational and entrepreneurial opportunities. This, in turn, necessitates tackling broader societal challenges like unfairness, harmful traditions, and the lack of legal safeguards for safety and equal participation. Only by addressing these foundational issues can all young people, regardless of background, fully contribute to a truly inclusive society and build sustainable peace.

Going beyond tokenism

The panel highlighted the pitfalls of superficial youth engagement in peace and security efforts. Peacebuilding efforts exclude valuable ideas and perspectives when they involve young people only to rubber-stamp predetermined decisions. They can also create cynicism and apathy among those they hope to engage. Shared ownership, allowing young people to help craft programmes and policy, can help foster a sense of responsibility and commitment to achieving long-term peace.

NAM Youth Organisation is particularly illustrative of this inclusive attitude. The strategy guiding its process encompasses three basic principles. First, their vibrant local chapters give young people the competence and space to start tackling issues facing them in their communities and put their diverse lenses on national peacebuilding efforts. This guarantees that the solutions are generated from the realities of the people directly affected by the conflict. Second, NAM emphasises indiscriminately involving young people in leadership positions. Those elected into leadership positions are based on their passion and competence rather than age. This guarantees that youth views are considered and their ideas significantly inform the organisation's plans. Youth-led SMEs can take a page from NAM's ways of operation by intentionally creating a culture that prioritises mentorship and free exchange of information, seeding young talent to enable the voice of young

people to be heard and given leading roles in what they should have a say about. Finally, NAM actively solicits thoughts and input from young people, ensuring they are included in the decision-making processes. Likewise, youth-led SMEs allow their customers or those targeted by their services to frequently and structuredly engage in dialogue with them. This provides the space to actively solicit young people's views and demands actively, ensuring the supply of service enhancements is tailored to specific needs and building a more peaceful and all-inclusive atmosphere. Suppose SMEs can embrace these ideas of giving youth space in decision-making. In that case, they will be positioned to go beyond tokenistic engagement and become influential community actors in enhancing peace and security.

Investing in capacity building:

The importance of equipping young people with the skills needed to excel in the youth, peace and security (YPS) sector was highlighted at the most recent YouthConnekt Africa Summit, recognising that young people have abundant experience and potential. The role that SMEs run by young people can play could be as follows: Young potential can be developed through many avenues. Small and medium-sized enterprises can offer seminars on developing skills in conflict resolution, mediation, civic engagement and leadership. These courses will develop young people's skills to navigate complex peacebuilding processes. Putting young employers in mentor programmes with academics and other experts in the peacebuilding field will provide young people with the necessary support and assistance in developing their competence and understanding. Running exchange programmes with youth from different nations will allow young people to learn from various peacebuilding methods, broadening their horizons and enhancing their creativity.

Supporting youth-led initiatives:

Youth are not simply waiting for peace to arrive but actively building peace through SME activities. Organisations and communities see the potential of youth-led projects in the SME sector; they provide financial and business development support to these young entrepreneurs to help them address local issues and build mutual understanding through their business activities. This could be integrating peacebuilding in their supply chains or developing goods or services that help to build social cohesion. Social media can be a powerful tool for SMEs. SMEs could increase awareness of peacebuilding issues through well-targeted campaigning and use social media to provide positive peer pressure to inspire others to support peace through their business activities. Helping youth-facilitated events that highlight diversity fosters a sense of shared humanity that dismantles societal divisions. SMEs can participate in these events by providing sponsorship, offering discounts for attendees from different identity groups, or providing time and experience as volunteers. These types of support to youth-led small and medium enterprises (SMEs) can help these youth entrepreneurs become advocates of peace and security at the community level.

Creating safe spaces for dialogue

At the YouthConnekt Africa Summit, the importance of creating safe spaces for young people, both physical and online, in areas affected by conflict was highlighted. In the shadow of war, fear and mistrust can quickly become entrenched. Safe spaces enable young people to speak up, share their experiences and build trust across divides. Having open conversations creates empathy and

understanding, the foundations of lasting peace. The importance of safe spaces is especially relevant for the SMEs run by young people. By making clear communication channels and building trust with their communities, these SMEs can help mitigate conflicts and scale up peacebuilding efforts.

Cross-Sectoral Collaboration:

Achieving peace and security cannot be a government initiative alone. For real progress to be made, governments, civic society, youth, the private sector and international organisations must work hard to develop the best partnerships possible, depth and breadth. These are not optional – they are essential, and such partnerships need to evolve from stifling multiple views to building spaces where collaboration and problem-solving can leverage those many different perspectives to the best effect. More can be done so that youth-led SMEs can play a vital, if not essential, role in achieving peace. Governments must shift their perspective from seeking to marginalise large groups of young people to invest in building trust, transparency and a sense of ownership. This means viewing young people as actors in the design of peace initiatives, not merely recipients of peace and security ‘grants’. Suppose governments and other key stakeholders aggressively partnered with small and medium enterprises owned and operated by young people, integrating their perspectives into a more holistic and effective peacebuilding strategy. In that case, young people may be able to create a context in which a peaceful and secure future is possible for all. By acting together, young people can only step into their identity as architects of a peaceful, secure future.

Promote information sharing and knowledge exchange among stakeholders:

SMEs run by young people could contribute significantly to bridging the knowledge gap, which was apparent in the above exchange. By connecting seasoned peacebuilders, more prominent organisations and local youth networks, SMEs can help with intergenerational communication and bring the young and the old closer together. They can also help tap into young people’s abilities to translate the local knowledge of youngsters in the community. Critically, this transfer opens two-way communication channels so that youngsters learn the strengths and weaknesses of more experienced organisations, drawing on the youthful perspective of young colleagues to contribute to their efforts. The most exciting possibility is the ability of SMEs run by young people to strengthen the local knowledge youth possess in the community. This knowledge – their understanding of what is needed on the ground, what works, what does not, and where future peace-building attempts should focus – is invaluable. However, its neglect could fatally undermine the work that peacebuilders undertake.

Develop and implement comprehensive national action plans on youth, peace, and security.

National Action Plans (NAPs) under the auspices of the UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security have enormous potential for small and medium enterprises led by young people. These plans, which seek to translate international commitments into actionable steps, often require collaboration among the parties involved at various levels. This creates a suitable environment for start-ups and small and medium businesses to thrive. NAPs can contribute towards increasing knowledge exchange and resources for young business owners, for example,

by fostering partnerships between large enterprises and small start-ups led by young people seeking to contribute to peacebuilding. They can also actively search for young small and medium enterprises with the potential for peacebuilding to engage with through projects. Young small and medium businesspeople are, by nature, known to be innovative, locally anchored and willing to adapt to offbeat circumstances. Given the typical living conditions and working conditions in conflict-ridden societies, youth-led SMEs have many traits and characteristics that are desirable for driving peacebuilding programmes. Having young small and medium enterprises involved in effective NAPs can offer prospects for a more lasting peace and contribute to a secure future. In essence, young people can overcome the cliché of being just the hope for a prosperous and peaceful future. They can be the hope in action.

Monitoring and Evaluation:

The forum stressed the need to move beyond YPS siloes. These issues needed to receive regular monitoring and evaluation based on data and feedback from young people and their communities. Increasingly, this means working through a data cycle, adapting and developing programmes as data rolls in to show how activities are perceived and resonating – or not. Transparency and accountability are now baked into these projects, not tagged on like an extra topping. This allows them to build trust and enable young people to take ownership of their roles in defining security and peace. To effectively contribute to a peaceful future, as outlined in the UNSC Resolution on Youth, Peace, and Security of 2015, youth-led SMEs must not only adhere to these principles but also demonstrate a sustained commitment to their implementation and monitoring

5. Conclusion

This article is a critical inspiration for the potential of youth-led SMEs to achieve peace in Africa. The relationship between entrepreneurship and peace-building is complex and multifaceted, integrating personal agency and structural factors.

At the individual level, young entrepreneurs' commitment and pro-peace motivations can motivate business practices that positively impact peacebuilding. Similarly, at the micro level, peacebuilding organisations can help amplify this positive impact through their direct support to these young entrepreneurs. Political instability, insecurity, and the shadow economy at the macro level can create incentives for business behaviour that the peace business paradigm would describe as negative peace. Understanding these complex forces requires an approach that does not flatten youth SMEs into dichotomous caricatures of 'peace entrepreneurs' or 'conflict profiteers'.

When we combine personal and structural factors analysis, it is clear how youth-led SMEs can contribute to peacebuilding. Moreover, a flourishing youth-led enterprise sector can foster integration and participation and reduce poverty for both men and women in a way that holds the key to a more prosperous and peaceful new Africa. SMEs create employment, grow economies, increase tax revenues, and enable governments to invest in needed social and economic infrastructure.

To harness this potential, we need a multifaceted approach that perhaps ought to be at the heart of peacebuilding from the very beginning: external support that involves subsidies, de-risking

markets, partnerships, local capacity building, and access to finance and resources for youth entrepreneurship, as well as youth empowerment programmes, peace clubs and other programmes that marry the energy of Africa's youth bulge with the drive for entrepreneurship and the principles of peacebuilding.

The 2023 YouthConnekt Africa Summit ushered stakeholders into a future in which youth are not simply consulted about their world of peacebuilding; they are invited, indeed invited, to lead it. Continued research and action on how youth-led SMEs can engage in peacebuilding and conflict prevention will inform future agendas as youth entrepreneurship continues to weave its complex web of change in a future safer and more peaceful Africa.

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