

Exploring the Space for Young People in Peacebuilding in Northern Mozambique



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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

This case study explores the intersection between young people, culture and peacebuilding in Mozambique and follows the research report ‘Exploring the Space for Young People in Peacebuilding in Coastal Communities of Tanzania and Kenya’, published in April 2024 (the report can be accessed at <https://peacefulchange.org/young-people-and-peacebuilding-swahili-coast/>). The research aims to analyse how culture contributes to young people’s positive role in discussions pertaining to peace, security and conflict; and to understand the role it plays in promoting social cohesion and solidarity along the Swahili Coast.

The research is part of the Kujenga Amani Pamoja programme, a three-year project implemented by WeWorld with support from Peaceful Change initiative (PCi), TABUFO (Tanzania Building Future Organization), 4H, Stretchers Youth Organization (SYO) and CNV (Conselho Nacional de Voluntariado) and co-funded by the European Union. The project is focusing on the Swahili Coast of Kenya’s Kwale region (Msambweni, LungaLunga and Matuga sub-counties), Tanzania’s Tanga region (Pangani DC and Mkinga DC) and Mtwara region (Mtwara DC, Tandahimba DC and Newala TC) and Mozambique’s Cabo Delgado province (Ancuabe, Chiure and Mecufi districts) and Nampula province (district of Erati).

After this brief introduction and a methodological section, the report will summarise the current context of northern Mozambique and will then delve into the research findings. The research findings are arranged according to the main questions covered by the research, starting with how young people participate in community discussions about security, conflict and peace. Next, the community perceptions of young people and their role in peace and security will be presented, followed by the factors obstructing young people from playing a positive social role in their community. Finally, we discuss the manifestations of Swahili cultural values, bonds and practices in the research locations. A concluding section outlines recommendations for programming around issues of youth, culture and peacebuilding in northern Mozambique.



A note on culture

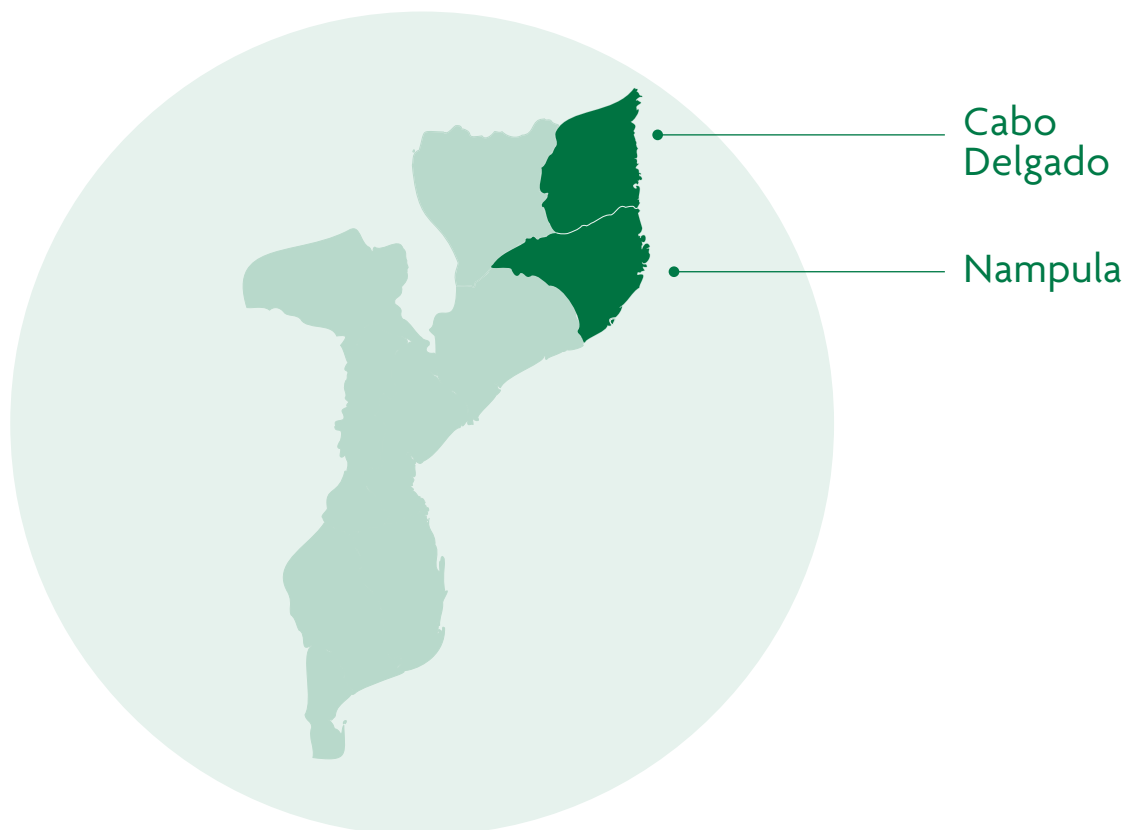
For the purpose of this research, we define culture as a set of heterogeneous customs, values and traditions rooted in the areas under study. We acknowledge the complex history and cultural characteristics of these areas, and we left it to participants to define what culture and cultural manifestations mean in their everyday life.

Methodology

The research methodology is qualitative, relying on desk review, key informant interviews and focus group discussions with a diverse set of community stakeholders across the selected locations. Participant selection sought to ensure representation of the relevant sub-locations, a balance of genders, and representation from various age groups and ethnic backgrounds to provide a comprehensive view of the community dynamics related to the intersection of young people, culture and peace. It further sought to consult authorities and government representatives in security and culture, informal community leaders, young people who are civically active and those who are not.

The volatility of the context and the highly securitised environment in northern Mozambique significantly challenged the research process. First of all, the spread of violence in the districts in the south of Cabo Delgado and northern Nampula in 2024 caused significant delays in the data collection, and necessitated adaptation of the geographic focus. Secondly, the highly securitised context and the need to safeguard the integrity of researchers and participants in the research limited the topics that could be covered and the methods used to cover them.

Gender norms and roles, which hinder the participation of women in discussions about peace and conflict, together with the limited access to the field due to insecurity, restrained the exploration of how gender affects the ways in which young people are included or excluded in discussions on peace and stability. Building on this research, this fundamental issue needs to be examined in more depth.



Context

Since 2017, northern Mozambique, and Cabo Delgado in particular, has been the epicentre of a violent conflict between an Islamist group locally known as al-Shabaab and Mozambique's security forces supported by their Rwandan and Southern African Development Community (SADC) allies. To date, the conflict has caused around 5,500 fatalities¹ and displaced more than one million people.

The emergence of al-Shabaab did not happen in a vacuum: northern Mozambique is characterised by a history of political and economic marginalisation, violence, and the presence of diverse ethnolinguistic groups in competition with each other. Nationally, economic opportunities are scarce, and young people represent a large share of the population (32% are between 15 and 34 years old).² Regional asymmetries, with the northern part of the country being the poorer area and the most populated, represent a risk factor for conflict at the local and national level.

In addition, the perception that the recent discoveries of natural gas and rubies will be exploited by international companies and local elites, leaving little or no benefit to the local communities, and the dispossessions of land through the illegalisation of informal workers related to these discoveries, such as artisanal miners, have triggered discontent and created fertile ground for anti-state rhetoric.

Civic space for addressing issues through dialogue and political debate is very limited. This has reinforced perceptions that the only way to bring about change is through violence. In a vicious spiral, violent conflict has served to further reduce the space for peaceful dialogue aimed at addressing structural causes of conflict.

The research focuses on three districts: two in the South of Cabo Delgado (Chiure and Mecufi) and one in North Nampula (Erati). These districts have been directly affected by the violent conflict, albeit marginally compared with northern and coastal parts of Cabo Delgado. Nevertheless, they have been heavily affected by the mass displacement of the population (attacked by the insurgents) and are believed to be places from which insurgents seek new recruits. Moreover, Chiure was the theatre of post-electoral violence in 2023, with protests and police repression that led to the death of one person.

1. ACLED, Zitamar News, Mediacoop – Cabo Ligado Update: 16–29 September 2024
<https://www.caboligado.com/>

2. Instituto Nacional de Estatística (2017) Censo 2017, Quadro 3. População por Idade

Key findings

1

How young people participate in community discussions about security, conflict and peace

The research revealed that the space for young people to participate in community discussions about security, conflict and peace varies across the three districts. In Chiure, youth associations and activists are present and visible, facilitating the participation of young people in discussions about peacebuilding, conflict resolution and social cohesion. In Mecufi and Erati, the scarcity of formal platforms to discuss these issues makes it more difficult to assess the influence of young people on these discussions.

In Chiure, youth associations allow young people to participate in community discussions; these include platforms such as the Association for Community Development of Chiure (ASANA); the Association of Young People United for Behaviour Change in Chiure (AJUMA); Solicita, Makhalelo Sana and Dimongo; initiatives such as Peace clubs and community radios; and public fora such as the District Youth Council (CDJ) and in the District and Municipal Consultative Councils. While the youth associations tend to be more open and embrace critical thought and discussions, the public fora tend to be aligned with and reproduce the discourses of the government, excluding critical voices. Young people feel that their concerns are not heard and addressed by the Municipal Council and the District Consultative Council. It is also important to note that these initiatives take place in Chiure Sede, the district centre, while other locations are left behind.



Youth associations were mentioned as playing a crucial role in bringing government authorities and communities closer together. In an incident in which a local force was involved in the murder of an electoral agent suspected of being a terrorist because he was a foreigner to Chiure, the youth associations convened the Government and communities in a very tense climate to mediate and solve the issue. In this context, foreigners risk being considered supporters of the insurgent group, and anything different from the norm is received with suspicion by local communities.

In Erati, and in particular in the town of Namapa, mechanisms for young people to contribute to discussions on security and peace are not well established and are only starting to take place, fostered by the local government, which is organising events in local schools and at informal meetings and community gatherings. Nevertheless, in Erati many women's associations work on the defence of girls' rights.

Across all districts, formal initiatives to foster young peoples' participation in peace and security discussions are mostly initiated by CSOs, NGOs and the state. In addition to these, there are informal and spontaneous spaces where young people meet and discuss issues relevant to them. These informal spaces are well accepted by authorities, who recognise their importance and offer them support through trainings – i.e. on social cohesion but also financial stability.

The composition and structure of these spaces is highly variable. Sometimes discussions take place in queues at gas stations, hospitals, commercial banks, markets, in film screening clubs, or at motorbike taxi gathering places (locally called Nagi). Women meet for the saving groups (see below) or at wells or streams where they collect water. Young women talk about security issues, with people they trust, in the small stalls that exist in Mecufi town – especially along the seafront, where they sell muatraca or muantopa (a cassava flour xima – porridge, normally called karakata in Nampula) accompanied by N'huzi (fish curry).

The saving groups, estique or xitique, are a common informal savings scheme in Mozambique, involving mainly adult women. The estique is intended to support everything from small financing challenges to housing construction projects. It also represents a space for fostering dialogue on issues that concern women, such as gender-based violence, and for building solidarity with other women; for example, among internally displaced persons (IDPs). Newly-arrived female IDPs from conflict-affected areas have been welcomed in these groups.

Youth associations were mentioned as playing a crucial role in bringing government authorities and communities closer together

Another form of platform that provides a space for young people to discuss community issues are the associations of fishermen, horticulturalists and musicians. In Mecufi, where youth associations are not visible, such groups of workers (sometimes convened by NGOs or the Mozambican Youth Organisation (OJM), a youth wing of FRELIMO) provide a space for young people (most often males) to defend their rights and business. In Erati, young people, both men and women, are organised formally and informally in thematic associations – namely: farmers, traders, electricians, bakers, cooks – whose main objective is to fight the unemployment of both men and women.

In the areas of the research, issues of peace and security are dealt through two pathways, the traditional and the formal. When issues cannot be solved within a family, the leader of the family may resort to formal – chefe do quarterão, secretario do bairro – or traditional authorities – capitão, capo, regulo. If an issue cannot be solved by these community leaders, then it is taken to the Community Tribunal (Tribunal Comunitario), which is led by the Community Judge, who does not have formal training in Law but is elected from within the community. The Community Tribunal represents the lowest level of the formal justice system. This hierarchical approach of conflict resolution is guided by the principle of promoting dialogue and understanding between people: a key factor in peacebuilding and social cohesion.

2

Community perceptions of young people and their role in peace and security

Community perceptions of young people and their role in relation to peace, security and conflict are mixed. Interviews reveal that older people, both men and women, acknowledge the important role played by young people in peace and security. Nevertheless, the common perception of young people as being inclined toward illegal and socially condemned activities, such as drugs and alcohol consumption, is a sign of a lack of trust and tense relations between different generations.

The involvement of young men in the extremist violence affecting Cabo Delgado is one of the catalysts for the distrust of the community in young people. This distrust has consequences for young people, who feel marginalised and stigmatised.

“In community meetings, when we stand up to speak about issues related to security and peace, where there are no government authorities, our messages are not received, we are considered rude.”

Member of a Youth Association, Chiure District

Various people expressed that the need to systematically and organically involve young people in initiatives and civic platforms is of paramount importance. Through this engagement, it would be possible to address young people's feelings of exclusion and, at the same time, challenge the perception of young people as idle and disengaged.

“The relationship between young people and the elderly is a conflictual one, because there is actually a difference in ideas: because of globalisation, young people have new ideas that are different from those of the elderly, but in the end there is a middle ground in order to understand each other.”

Respondent from Erati District



3

Factors obstructing young people from playing a positive social role in their community

Exclusion and marginalisation of young people, insufficient access to education and vocational training, economic precarity and lack of jobs were identified as the main factors limiting young people when it came to playing positive social roles in their communities. Young people from the districts of Chiure, Erati and Mecufi feel that when initiatives and opportunities arise locally, they are not invited to share their opinions; that people from other districts have better access to them; and that corruption and nepotism are barriers to their participation.

“When development projects come, these organisations recruit people from other parts of the province or the country, and not from Erati, this is a problem.”

Member of a Youth Association, Erati District

Often, young people do not have the time or resources to participate in activism. When they organise themselves spontaneously, they usually do it to protest unemployment or to represent their interests as workers. In Mecufi, for example, many young men are fishermen and salt workers, and while they do not have time to join social cohesion initiatives, they are organised in associations.

“The carrying-out of seasonal paid activities constitutes an obstacle to the participation of young people in voluntary activities, including in meetings that do not have the ultimate goal of immediate gain.”

Government respondent, Mecufi District

Lack of infrastructure and the economic outlook of the districts is also a structural obstacle to young people's participation in civic life. Young farmers complain about a lack of market meaning products need to be sold at very low prices. Small businesses are constantly risking bankruptcy, making the lives of young people extremely precarious.

The violent conflict has contributed to the reduction of individual and collective freedoms and exacerbated the barriers that prevent young people, in these districts, from fully realising their potential for local development. The counter-insurgency operations make youth feel endangered. They prefer to stay silent, do not participate in discussions about security and peace and do not complain because they feel that complaints may be considered support for the insurgency.

4

Manifestation of Swahili cultural values, bonds and practices

The research confirmed the importance of religious and traditional values and education, which consolidate a sense of belonging and reinforce collective identity. Initiation rites and rites of passage play a fundamental role in this regard. These traditional institutions and processes hold a particularly important role in transmitting values, norms and knowledge about good and evil, solidarity with others and respect for their wellbeing. They are aimed at adolescents to mark their transition to adulthood and their integration into society. Women play a fundamental role in rites for both boys and girls. In the rites for young boys, it is a woman who accompanies the boy and then welcomes back him into society as a young man.

One of the fundamental values that tradition preserves is hospitality, which is demonstrated by a willingness to host internally displaced people in local homes. The research discovered that some families were hosting more than ten people with whom they had no previous connections. This represents an example of hospitality and sharing, which are values taught through initiation rites and also sung in popular songs.

Hospitality is an important cultural value - some families were hosting more than ten displaced people with whom they had no previous connections.

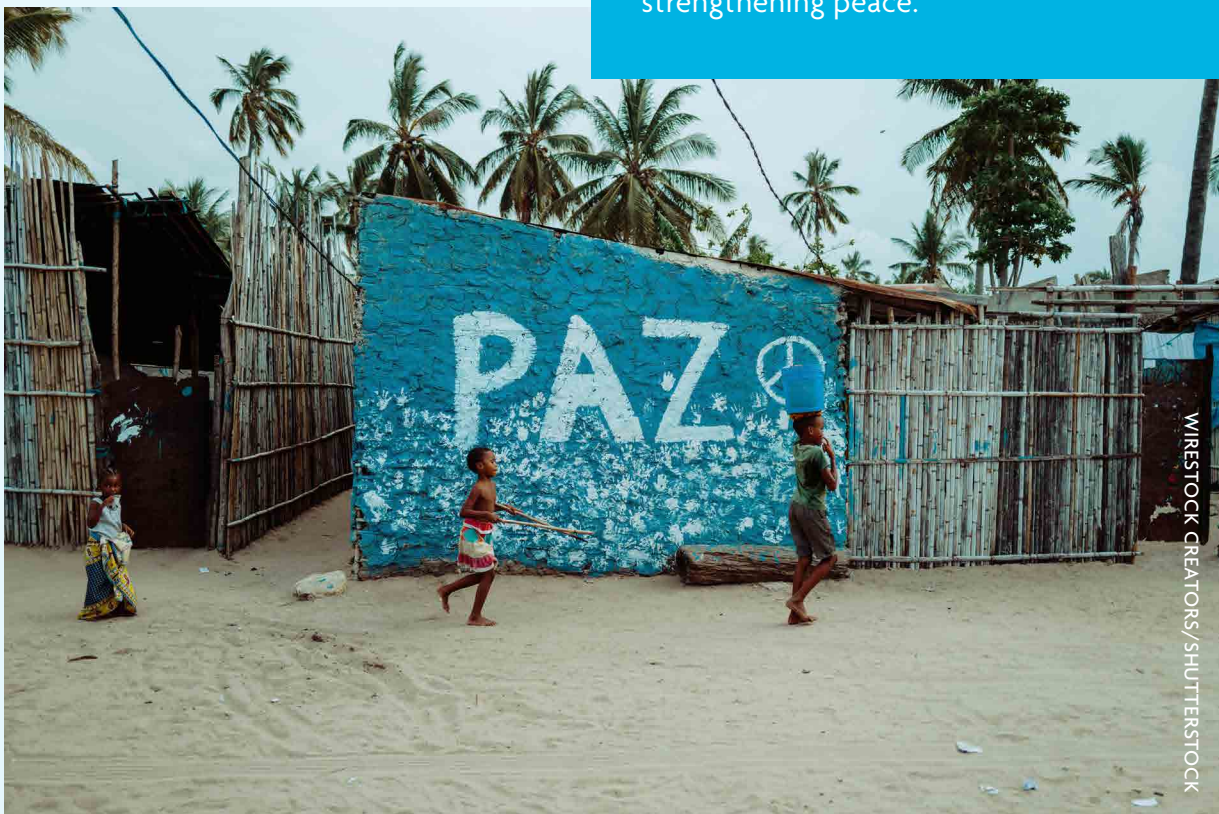
Cultural songs and dances, such as Tufo in Chiure and Mecufi, and Kirimo and Muzope in Mecufi, are practised as a symbol of unity, regardless of culture of origin, gender or race. Dances and music are often performed at special celebrations and festivals, and on commemorative days. Government entities and NGOs have used dance groups to prevent various social problems, including events to raise awareness about safeguarding the environment, avoiding fires, preventing diseases, and solving conflicts, among others. Beyond music and dances, the practice of football stands out as an occasion for mobilisation of the community and promoting social cohesion. While it is mainly practised by men, this sport brings together the wider community.



Conclusion and recommendations

The case study highlights the critical yet challenging role of young people in fostering social cohesion within Chiure, Mecufi and Erati. Despite significant differences across the districts, with Chiure representing the district with more youth associations and activists, young people face similar barriers to meaningful participation in discussions on security and peace. Factors such as economic instability, limited access to education and employment, and perceptions of young people as disengaged or risk-seeking have led to feelings of marginalisation and exclusion. The violent context in northern Mozambique further restricts young people from raising their voices, as expressing concerns related to security can be perceived as dissent.

Nevertheless, cultural practices, formal and informal spaces and associations have emerged as important spaces for engagement, providing an avenue for young people to contribute to community discussions about peace. Shared community values, expressed through everyday interaction but also especially through music, dance, and community events like football, reinforce unity and collective identity. To harness the full potential of young people in peacebuilding, it is essential to sustain safe and inclusive spaces that bridge generational gaps, foster women's participation, and address socio-economic constraints. The following recommendations are aimed at those working to strengthen young people's role in addressing insecurity and strengthening peace.



1

Support and leverage formal and informal associations and cultural spaces for young people's participation in peace and security discussions.

Young people find ways to participate in discussions about peace, security and conflict through various spaces: both formal (such as youth associations, community radios and/or consultative councils) and informal (such as saving groups and associations of workers). Efforts to support these associations could include:

- engaging with young men and women in the spaces they already occupy such as youth associations, taxi stations, workers' associations, community-based organisations, informal gathering places, ceremonies and football tournaments
- building partnerships among civil society, youth associations, community leaders, and cultural organisations to create safe, collaborative environments where young people can express their concerns and contribute to resilience-building efforts
- commitment from trusted partners to guide the engagement with new partners, in order to avoid putting young people at risk. When young people speak freely about their concerns and voice their opinions, this may trigger safety and/or conflict sensitivity risks. Be aware that engaging with young people in this highly politicised environment needs caution, and particularly demands awareness about local and national dynamics
- the undertaking of additional research that explicitly looks at young women's role in the communities and at the gendered aspects of cultural values and practices, seeking to identify positive aspects that can promote women's empowerment
- actions to deepen understanding of why Chiure seems to provide more fertile ground for youth association and the participation of young people in community life, and to identify entry points to strengthen civil society in Mecufi and Erati.



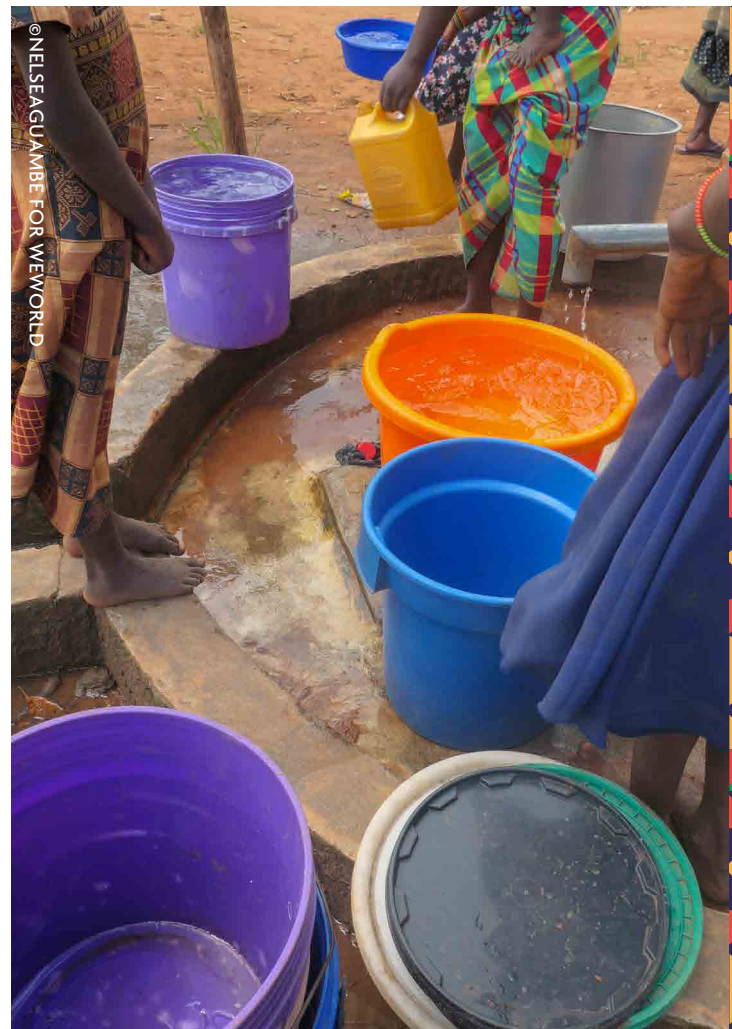
2

Collaborate across sectors to develop holistic approaches that address economic as well as social barriers to young people's civic engagement

Efforts to increase the inclusion of young people in issues relating to peace and security will be most effective if they also address the economic challenges that exclude young people and fuel unrest.

Government bodies, INGOs, NGOs, and local authorities should combine support for peace and social cohesion with the creation of sustainable livelihoods and the strengthening of local economies in areas impacted by insecurity. Such partnerships should focus on equitable, community-centred economic development, targeting the vulnerable and most marginalised groups. Key actions could include:

- engaging with multi-stakeholder forums where INGOs, NGOs, and government representatives collaborate on creating programmes that develop local skills and generate employment opportunities, particularly for young people and marginalised groups
- creating joint initiatives to enhance access to financial services, small grants and vocational training with skills in trades relevant to the local economy, such as agriculture, fishing, and small-scale manufacturing. Target young people from Chiure, Mecufi and Erati, who often see these opportunities being open only to people from other regions
- advocating for better coordination among the various actors working in the humanitarian–development–peacebuilding area in northern Mozambique. Connect with other international NGOs, UN and international organisations, state structures and civil society in northern Mozambique and ensure that project activities are integrated into a broader plan for northern Mozambique



3

Change perceptions of young people and build relationships between young people and elders in the community as well as government security actors

In order to create conditions for young people to increasingly contribute to and influence matters of peace and security in their communities, efforts must be made to change the way young people are perceived by the wider community and community leaders (formal and informal), as well as to transform relationships between young people and older community members and government security actors. For example:

- Civil society, the wider peacebuilding community, community leaders and government officials should promote and enable inter-generational dialogue in order to develop common understanding between elders and young men and women – potentially using dialogue around cultural practices and how these can be used to promote peace as an entry point.
- A range of approaches to build better relationships between young men and women and elders and government security actors should be explored, using sports, music and drama as methods of bringing people together.





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