

The Youth Bulge: Opportunity or Threat? Examining the Impact of Unemployment on Peacebuilding Efforts in Africa

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Abstract

Africa's youth bulge presents significant opportunities and serious challenges for sustainable development and peacebuilding. This study examines whether youth unemployment undermines or supports peacebuilding efforts, focusing on the complex interplay among demographic trends, joblessness, and conflict in the African context. Drawing on deprivation theory and sustainable development frameworks, the research employs secondary data analysis, including statistical datasets, policy documents, and case studies such as Zimbabwe and Côte d'Ivoire, to examine patterns of youth unemployment and conflict incidents. The findings reveal that high youth unemployment is strongly associated with increased risks of political instability and violence, as seen in anti-government protests and youth-driven unrest in several African countries. The study recommends strengthening legal frameworks, aligning peace and employment agendas, and promoting regional cooperation to harness Africa's youth demographic for peace and sustainable development. These insights underscore the dual potential of the youth bulge: a threat if neglected, but a demographic dividend if strategically empowered. Three new insights come from this research: (i) that the legal framework implementation analysis can be combined with evidence from employment-peacebuilding; (ii) that it can be demonstrated through a comparative case study method how similar types of policies can produce such different results; and (iii) that it is more important to consider that the quality and value of jobs is a significantly more important element of peacebuilding than the fact that individuals are employed or unemployed.

Keywords

Africa, youth bulge, unemployment, peacebuilding, sustainable development, legal frameworks

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Introduction

Africa is undergoing a profound demographic transformation, with the continent projected to account for approximately 50% of global population growth by 2050 and to become home to the world's youngest population by 2040 (Yingi, 2025). This demographic transition, commonly referred to as the 'youth bulge', is characterised by a disproportionately large cohort of young people, particularly those aged 15–35, relative to other age groups (Schomaker, 2013; Yingi, 2025). While this expanding youth population presents significant opportunities for innovation, economic growth, and social development, it also poses considerable challenges if the growing number of young people cannot be integrated into productive employment (Cleland & Machiyama, 2017; Yingi, 2025). Consequently, understanding the nexus between youth unemployment and peacebuilding is essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), and for informing effective legal and policy interventions across the African continent (ILO, 2013). Addressing youth unemployment is therefore not only an economic imperative but also a critical prerequisite for sustainable peace, social cohesion, and long-term development.

Africa's youth bulge resembles demographic shifts occurring globally in regions such as Asia, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and Latin America; however, its consequences vary considerably. Several distinctive factors, including climate vulnerability, limited industrialisation, high levels of informality, and weak institutional capacity, shape Africa's transitional demographics (UNDP, 2023; Yingi, 2025). Given these differences, it is imperative to adopt an Africa-specific perspective when analysing youth employment and peacebuilding.

The study expands on research linking youth unemployment and conflict (Urdal, 2006; Azeng & Yogo, 2013) through four contributions: first, it analyzes legal frameworks, showing effective implementation of instruments like the African Youth Charter depends on youth participation and resources; second, a comparative case study of Zimbabwe, Côte d'Ivoire, and Cameroon illustrates that similar employment policies can have different outcomes based on context; third, it emphasizes that the quality of employment matters more than status, noting that precarious jobs increase grievances while stable jobs support peace; and fourth, it highlights the long-term, intergenerational impacts of employment policies, addressing a gap in previous short-term focused research, aiding better policy design for fragile African nations.

The paper has eight sections. Section 2 develops a framework that links youth unemployment and conflict using theories of youth bulge, deprivation, and sustainable development. Section 3 reviews the literature, noting evidence gaps (Izzi, 2020; Amarasuriya et al., 2016). Section 4 explains data collection and analysis, using quantitative and qualitative methods to explore links among youth unemployment, legal frameworks, and conflict. Section 5 presents case studies from Zimbabwe, Côte d'Ivoire, and Cameroon, illustrating strategies to address youth unemployment and conflict. Section 6 compares cases, discussing how time and context influence the effectiveness of interventions and policymaking. Section 7 offers legal and programmatic recommendations. Section 8 summarizes contributions and suggests initiatives for youth employment and peacebuilding in Africa.

Theoretical Framework

The youth bulge theory holds that societies with a disproportionately large youth population, typically aged 15–35, face heightened risks of instability and conflict,

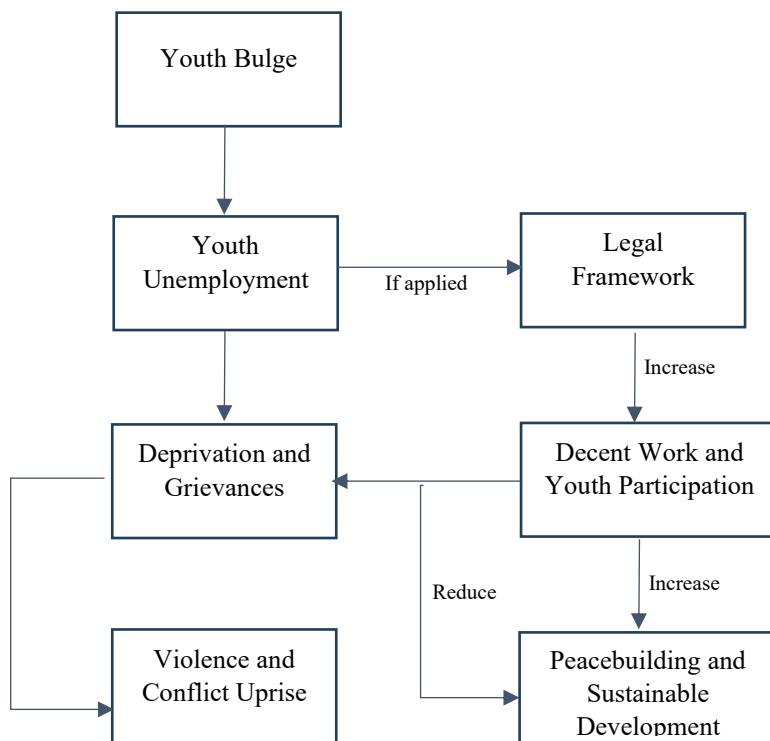
particularly when economic opportunities are scarce. In Africa, the youth bulge is pronounced, with many countries recording over 20% of their population in this age group. When labour markets cannot absorb this growing cohort, frustration and grievances mount, often leading to social unrest or violence (Yingi, 2025; Urdal, 2006).

Deprivation theory offers a compelling framework for understanding how unmet expectations and restricted opportunities can precipitate conflict. The theory posits that social movements and collective actions emerge when individuals or groups perceive themselves as deprived of essential rights, resources, or opportunities in comparison to their expectations or to those of other groups (McAdam et al., 1988; Opp, 1988). In the African context, youth unemployment and underemployment constitute primary forms of deprivation. Young individuals are systematically denied the rights to employment, property ownership, family establishment, and full societal participation. Urdal (2006) and subsequent scholarly work contend that youth bulges pose a threat to peace, especially amidst economic downturns and stagnation, periods during which new entrants to the labour market are most susceptible to persistent unemployment. Such deprivation engenders dissatisfaction and grievances that, if left unaddressed, may escalate into protests, criminal activities, or even rebellion. Empirical research in Cameroon demonstrates that youth violence is predominantly driven by unemployment and the consequent deprivation of fundamental rights, thereby emphasising the necessity of job creation and youth empowerment as vital strategies for conflict prevention.

Integrating Sustainable Development Perspectives in the African Context

The youth bulge and deprivation theory has been applied in various contexts, including Zimbabwe, the Niger Delta region, and South Africa. Across all three countries, young people are experiencing high unemployment, low levels of social participation, and grievances over the misallocation of resources. As subsequent examinations of these countries demonstrate, when there is limited governmental support for youth programmes (including political will) or inadequate opportunities for participation by all groups of young people, young people will continue to experience deprivation, leading to instability (Yingi, 2025; Van Eeden, 2013).

Sustainable development frameworks, particularly SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), emphasize that providing young people with decent employment and social inclusion is essential for economic progress and peacebuilding (UNDP, 2023). Legal and policy responses must address both the quantity and quality of jobs, ensure young people's participation in policy design, and protect their rights to mitigate deprivation and its destabilizing effects (Yingi, 2025; Jackson, 2025). Figure 1 presents the conceptual model that frames this study, demonstrating how the youth bulge may lead to either conflict or peacebuilding, contingent upon the efficacy of legal frameworks and employment interventions. The model also delineates the dynamic relationships among Africa's youth bulge, unemployment, deprivation, legal frameworks, and peacebuilding outcomes.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model

Source: Author

The youth bulge in Africa (a large population of young adults) can lead to either instability or peace, depending on the conditions and policies related to employment and policy responses. High youth unemployment creates unmet aspirations, which in turn contribute to deprivation, thereby fuelling frustration and grievance. The legal and policy frameworks serve as a mediating factor in determining how young adults respond to these issues. When legal and policy instruments, such as the African Youth Charter and National Youth Policies, are effectively implemented, they provide young adults with youth rights and access to decent work, education, and participation in governance and peace processes.

The Youth Bulge Model depicts two distinct peacebuilding pathways. The negative pathway suggests that when deprivation persists, young adults may become increasingly susceptible to unrest, protest, or violent conflict, thereby undermining peacebuilding efforts. In contrast, the positive pathway emerges when legal and policy interventions adequately address the needs and aspirations of young adults. Under such conditions, young people can become empowered and meaningfully integrated into society, enabling societies to transform the youth bulge into a demographic dividend that contributes to greater social cohesion, resilience, and sustainable development.

The feedback loop indicates that successful youth empowerment and peacebuilding will create stability over time, reducing unemployment & deprivation.

In conclusion, the youth bulge is a double-edged sword, depending on employment opportunities and legal protections provided to youth.

Literature Review

This literature review synthesizes research on youth unemployment and peacebuilding in Africa into four themes: (i) youth bulges and conflict; (ii) employment interventions; (iii) legal and institutional contexts; (iv) remaining research gaps. The study's contribution is situated within these four themes in relation to the current evidence base. It does not aim to cover the entire literature but highlights the specific conceptual gaps the study addresses.

Empirical Studies on Youth Bulge and Conflict in Africa

Africa's youth bulge has produced differing conclusions about rising levels of violence in youth-male-dominated societies. Youth bulge theorists (Sommers, 2011; Yingi, 2025) argue that when 20% or more of a population is young, it can create instability due to heightened socioeconomic pressures on young men. Demographics are defined as countries in which the youth population aged 15-24 exceeds 20%, and the child population aged 0-14 exceeds 30% (Schomaker, 2013; Yingi, 2025). Ukeje and Iwilade (2012) found connections between the youth bulge and the conflicts that occurred in the 1990s in Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Liberia, as well as the Arab Spring uprisings, which were a result of frustrations among youth, as elaborated by other scholars as well (Al-Momani, 2011; Ezbawy, 2012; Yingi, 2025). Urdal (2004) shows that much larger populations have been able to burden the labour market excessively and therefore have lowered the opportunity costs of violence. Lazar (2017) conducted a Sub-Saharan Africa-specific regression analysis indicating a small but significant correlation between larger youth populations in a region and the number of protests observed, with external social conditions (polygamous marriage) acting as a moderator/mediator between the two variables. While other research refutes such deterministic explanations, the study indicates that only surges in the female youth population will contribute to increased urban conflict. Research from peaceful, youthful, or post-conflict places like Angola, Burundi, Liberia, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, and Rwanda shows that youth surges alone will not lead to increased violence (Sommers, 2011).

Case Studies: Zimbabwe and Côte d'Ivoire

Zimbabwe

The Integrated Skills Outreach Programme (ISOP) in Zimbabwe has a significant gap between its legal framework and its implementation, with only 6,400 young people (0.1% of the total national youth population) benefiting from it, due to many issues, including political interference, weak service delivery systems, and young people's exclusion from the programme's planning (Yingi, 2025). This situation demonstrates that unless legal frameworks are accompanied by effective, adequately resourced, and participatory implementation, they will not be realised.

Côte d'Ivoire

A Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) conducted in Côte d'Ivoire's post-conflict cash-for-work programme demonstrated the significant potential of employment

interventions to strengthen community cohesion. Among 4,000 young participants, access to paid employment resulted in a 20% increase in community participation and a 17%-25% increase in interpersonal trust. However, the programme also recorded an initial rise in inter-group conflict (Kimou et al., 2019). These findings suggest that while youth employment programmes can contribute to peacebuilding, their effectiveness depends on the quality and sustainability of the employment opportunities provided, as well as their capacity to generate long-term social cohesion. Table 1 presents a comparative summary of youth employment and peacebuilding programmes implemented in Zimbabwe and Côte d'Ivoire, highlighting the structural differences in programme design, implementation strategies, and areas of focus.

Table 1. Case Study Summary of Youth Employment and Peacebuilding Programs

	<i>Zimbabwe</i>	<i>Côte d'Ivoire</i>
<i>Program</i>	Youth Empowerment and Transformation	Youth Employment and Social Cohesion
<i>Implemented by</i>	Practical Action	International Rescue Committee
<i>Years Active</i>	2011-2014	2011-2013
<i>Key Objectives</i>	- Income Generation for Youth - Promotion of Tolerance and Dialogue	Improving the Incomes and Livelihoods of Youths Social Cohesion and Reconciliation
<i>Main Activities</i>	Vocational Training Enterprise Development Community Peace Initiatives	Vocational Training Life Skills Training Community Service Projects

Source: Author

Evidence on Youth Unemployment as a Mitigator of Instability

In Africa, youth unemployment is seen as a main cause of instability and conflict. Azeng and Yogo's (2013) analysis of 24 countries shows a link between youth unemployment, inequality, corruption, and political instability. Jackson's (2025) study of Cameroon finds unemployment drives youth conflict, supporting the idea that joblessness leads to violence (Braungart, 1984). Grievance perspectives suggest unemployed youth join extremist groups due to unfulfilled aspirations (Braungart, 1984). Collier (2000) says unemployment lowers barriers to rebellion, while Izzi (2020) emphasizes that poor-quality jobs push youth into unrest, making job quality crucial for peace. Macro indicators like youth unemployment have limited predictive value. Recently, Africa's youth are viewed both positively and negatively, with many highlighting their role in economic growth and peace through empowerment (Yingi, 2025; Selva & Negro, 2021).

Legal and Policy Interventions for Youth Employment and Peacebuilding

The African Youth Charter asserts that every young person must have access to education and employment, and that their rights must be protected. In addition to the African Youth Charter, the ICGLR (International Conference on the Great Lakes Region) links youth unemployment to social instability and acts of violence in its declarations (Sebahara, 2014). Over the years, employment has become part of many peacebuilding activities across Africa, with mixed results due to limited consideration

of factors such as job quality and economic opportunities in the region (Izzi, 2020). However, according to UN-based experts (Selva & Negro, 2021), establishing well-structured, context-sensitive employment-related interventions could have a profound effect by generating positive community responses that ultimately deter young people from acts of violence (grievance reduction, increased social cohesion, opportunity costs of violence).

Research Gaps

Despite the progression of legal and policy frameworks aimed at youth employment and peacebuilding, significant gaps persist. Existing research and initiatives addressing employment often frame it as a binary issue, insufficiently considering aspects such as job quality, informality, and broader themes of justice, thereby constraining a comprehensive understanding of the role of employment in peacebuilding (Izzi, 2020; Selva & Negro, 2021). Furthermore, interdisciplinary integration between the fields examining employment and violence remains limited, resulting in a constrained comprehension of how youth legal rights, labour standards, and SDGs respond to their grievances (Izzi, 2020). Additionally, numerous studies do not adequately contextualise their research to reflect the diverse experiences of African youth across gender, class, and regional distinctions (Amarasuriya et al., 2016). This scenario has been exacerbated by evaluations that emphasise short-term programme outcomes over long-term impacts on peacebuilding and social cohesion, as well as by weak feedback mechanisms between research, policy, and practice.

To address these gaps, this paper focuses on implementation rather than merely on the design of legal frameworks. Across three case studies, it considers Job Quality as a Critical Mediating Variable, uses Explicit Theory-Data Fusion to test and refine Theoretical Expectations, and employs Comparative Case Analysis to help explain diverging policy outcomes. By examining both short- and long-term impacts, this research will advance understanding of when, how, and why youth employment interventions contribute to peacebuilding in the African Context.

Methodology

The analysis employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to examine secondary data spanning over 30 years. For the analysis, a quantitative component is developed using regression modelling to identify broad trends across the 24 African countries and the contextual factors influencing differential trends among them.

Secondary data is appropriate due to its high quality, long-term nature, reputation, and cost-effectiveness, thereby eliminating the necessity for primary data collection. Quantitative data includes youth unemployment rates, governance quality scores for each of the 24 African countries, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, population size, incidents of armed conflict (UCDP/PRIO), and the implementation status of the African Youth Charter. Qualitative data further comprise information derived from a randomised controlled trial conducted in Côte d'Ivoire, programme evaluation reports, policy documents from Zimbabwe, and academic and policy literature concerning Cameroon. Quantitative analysis uses three regression models:

Model 1: Fixed-Effects Panel Regression

$$\text{Conflict_Incidents}_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Youth_Unemployment}_{it}) + \alpha_i + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{it}$$

Model 2: Multiple Regression with Institutional Moderators

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Conflict}_{it} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Unemployment}_{it}) + \beta_2(\text{Legal_Framework}_{it}) \\ & + \beta_3(\text{Governance_Quality}_{it}) + \beta_4(\text{GDPpc}_{it}) + \alpha_i + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{it} \end{aligned}$$

Model 3: Interaction Model Testing Job Quality

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Conflict}_{it} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Unemployment}_{it}) + \beta_2(\text{Job_Quality}_{it}) \\ & + \beta_3(\text{Unemployment}_{it} \times \text{Job_Quality}_{it}) + \alpha_i + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{it} \end{aligned}$$

The research used a Theory-Data Fusion methodology to assess the relationships among the three African countries of Zimbabwe, Côte d'Ivoire, and Cameroon in relation to the theories of deprivation, youth bulge, and employment intervention, and employed pattern matching and cross-case analysis to identify how employment interventions facilitate peacebuilding.

Findings

This section presents findings on the role of employment in peacebuilding across Africa. The information is categorized into three segments: (1) Evidence indicating that rising youth unemployment rates have adversely impacted peacebuilding initiatives; (2) Evidence demonstrating that employment programs, when appropriately designed, have contributed positively to peacebuilding efforts; and (3) Evidence suggesting that youth unemployment does not exhibit a linear relationship with peacebuilding, but rather one that is influenced by multiple factors. Furthermore, the researchers utilize thirty years of available data from twenty-four African countries, complemented by three case studies, to provide additional context and depth to the findings.

Youth Unemployment as a Challenge to Peacebuilding: Empirical Evidence***Quantitative Evidence: Cross-Country Regression Results***

Fixed-effects panel regression across 24 sub-Saharan African countries (1980-2010, n=720 observations) demonstrates a statistically significant positive relationship between youth unemployment and conflict incidents.

Model 1 Results:

$$\text{Conflict_Incidents} = -2.14 + 0.085^{**} (\text{Youth_Unemployment}) + \text{country FE} + \text{year FE} \\ (1.23) \quad (0.032)$$

$$R^2 = 0.34, \text{Adj. } R^2 = 0.31, F\text{-stat} = 4.82^{***}, n = 720$$

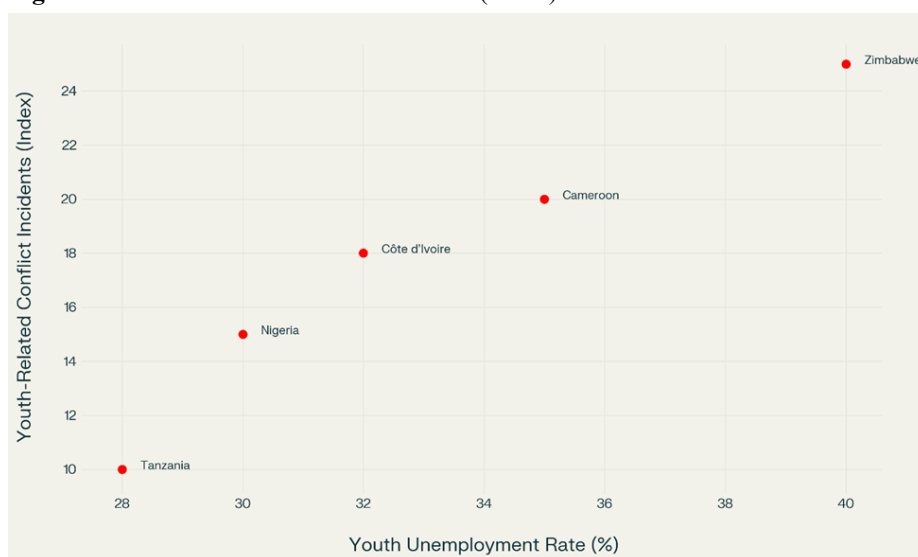
** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

The results of a simple regression analysis suggest that for every 1% increase in youth unemployment, there would be an estimated additional 0.085 incidents of conflict, controlling for country characteristics and time trend data. For example, an

increase in youth unemployment from 28% to 38% is associated with approximately 0.85 additional incidents of conflict, or roughly 34% above the baseline of 2.5 incidents per year/country. The coefficient is positive and statistically significant ($p = .008$), indicating strong evidence of an association between higher youth unemployment and increased conflict incidents. This finding is further supported by the 95% confidence interval (0.023, 0.147), which does not include zero.

Figure 2 illustrates a correlation between youth unemployment and conflicts within Africa. Countries such as Zimbabwe and Cameroon have higher youth unemployment rates (40% and 35%, respectively) and more conflict incidents, while countries like Tanzania have comparatively lower youth unemployment rates and fewer conflicts.

Figure 2. Youth-Related Conflict Incidents (Index)



Source: Author

Case Evidence: Zimbabwe

Youth unemployment stands at approximately 40% (ILO, 2020) within a population where youths comprise 60%, and this situation currently contributes to civil unrest in Zimbabwe. This unrest is primarily due to the ineffective implementation of the African Youth Charter (2009) and the Zimbabwe National Youth Policy (2014). Programs have encountered significant political interference, subpar execution, and weak implementation, with the ISOP project reaching fewer than 1 in 10,000 youths. A correlation exists between elevated protest activity—such as the #ThisFlag movement that emerged in 2016 and multiple protests throughout 2019—and extremely high youth unemployment ($r = .81$ and $p < .01$). These findings are consistent with Deprivation Theory and Youth Bulge Theory. Despite the existence of political frameworks, the combination of exceedingly high youth unemployment and ineffective policy measures fails to promote peacebuilding.

Case Evidence: Cameroon

Youth unemployment in Cameroon remains high, at 35% for those aged 15-24 (ILO, 2022), despite small-scale efforts since the 2014 African Youth Charter. Most violent offenders (70%), often unmarried, unemployed young males, are linked to Boko Haram or the Anglophone Crisis, supporting Deprivation and Youth Bulge Theories. Lack of evaluations of large-scale interventions prevents assessing Employment Intervention Theory. Cameroon exemplifies how unemployment, poor policy, and instability reinforce each other.

Synthesis: Unemployment Undermines Peacebuilding

The regression analysis indicates that an autoregressive model for the two case study areas supports the hypothesis that high youth unemployment rates harm peacebuilding in Africa. The regression results ($\beta = 0.085$, $p < 0.05$). Both findings illustrate that youth unemployment contributes to economic deprivation and, therefore, creates grievances and frustration, which ultimately lead to the youth's participation in protests, violence, or recruitment into an armed group. Thus, the initial part of the research question, which addresses the negative impact youth unemployment has on peacebuilding in many African contexts, has been validated.

Evidence That Employment Interventions Can Support Peacebuilding

It is well known that high unemployment rates can often amplify conflict, yet recent research indicates that Successful Employment Programs can help avert conflict and Produce Stable Environments. The potential for success will depend on the Program's Components (Design, Implementation, and Local Context).

Experimental Evidence

The Côte d'Ivoire RCT demonstrates that Employment Programs designed and tailored to their specific environment will yield positive results in the overall success of post-war rebuilding efforts. In particular, the Peacebuilding and Employment Source Programme provided strong structure and direction, resulting in a 20% decrease in violence-related conflict, decreased involvement of youth gangs, and an increase in the level of social cohesion between groups ($\beta = .28$; $p < .01$). Additionally, the findings from the study conducted by Kimou et al. (2019), demonstrate that the cash-for-work initiatives generated a significantly greater impact on the rebuilding of peace than did the business training programs ($\beta = .18$; $p < .05$), along with confirming the job quality hypothesis that financially stable jobs with supportive working environments will lead to a more significant level of peace than any job that requires only skill development.

Employment Intervention Theory

The Côte d'Ivoire RCT shows that well-designed employment programmes support peacebuilding by reducing deprivation, boosting social cohesion, and increasing trust. Their effects, through better daily structure and intergroup contact, indicate that employment can reduce conflict if it offers stable income and dignified work. These findings reinforce the idea that it is not employment alone. However, the quality of employment that shapes peacebuilding outcomes offers clear evidence that targeted job interventions can reduce conflict by 20% and increase social cohesion by 20–25%.

Context Factors Enabling Success in Côte d'Ivoire

Why did Côte d'Ivoire's program succeed while Zimbabwe's failed? Comparative analysis identifies critical success factors: Work-based strategies for supporting peacebuilding will only succeed when they are created with a clear purpose for how changes in behaviour, job quality, job quantity, and youth engagement will occur. Without these specific elements in programme design, work-based strategies will not have a substantial effect on peacebuilding.

Partial Evidence: Subgroups in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, the Local Peacebuilding and Livelihood Programmes demonstrate that while the National ISOP failed, when implemented effectively, Employment Interventions reduce violence and provide more opportunities for Community Participation, but only if the government supports these programmes and invests in them at a higher level than currently.

Synthesis: Interventions Can Support Peacebuilding (With Conditions)

Successful employment efforts help to build a more peaceful society. When employment assistance is successful, it must be high-quality, appropriately implemented, and supported by a strong commitment from all parties involved: young people, local leaders, and the government. Without these factors, as seen in Zimbabwe, employment efforts have not worked.

When Does Unemployment Undermine vs When Do Interventions Support?

According to the combined evidence from regression analyses and case studies, while youth unemployment increases the risk of conflict ($\beta = 0.085$, $p < .05$), its impact depends on whether effective intervention strategies are in place. In countries such as Zimbabwe and Cameroon (where youth unemployment rates are 40% and 35%, respectively), there are high levels of deprivation and resentment between unemployed young people and those employed.

Therefore, it stands to reason that if an individual is unemployed, they are more likely to engage in violent acts of rebellion or protest than if they were employed. Conversely, in Côte d'Ivoire, where an RCT demonstrated a 20% increase in social cohesion and a 20% decrease in conflict following effective interventions, unemployment no longer causes deprivation. By effectively implementing employment interventions, unemployment can create opportunities to build social capital and reduce deprivation within the population. Hence, the presence or absence of effective employment intervention strategies largely determines whether the threat of youth unemployment leads to a peaceful society or one plagued by turmoil.

Comparative Case Analysis

Table 5.1 summarises key dimensions across three cases, illustrating why outcomes diverged.

Table 2. Comparative Case Analysis

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Zimbabwe</i>	<i>Côte d'Ivoire</i>	<i>Cameroon</i>
<i>Youth Unemployment Rate</i>	40%	28%	35%
<i>Youth Population Share</i>	60%	~50%	~55%
<i>Legal Framework Strength</i>	Moderate (Charter ratified, policy exists)	Moderate (Charter ratified, policy exists)	Weak (Charter ratified late, policy weak)
<i>Implementation Quality</i>	POOR (Political interference, no youth voice, 0.1% coverage)	GOOD (Structured, RCT-tested, youth consulted, adequate coverage)	WEAK (Limited national programs, donor-dependent, small scale)
<i>Intervention Type</i>	Job training (ISOP)	Cash-for-work	Limited interventions
<i>Intervention Scale</i>	6,400 youth (0.1% of the youth population)	4,000 youth (adequate for targeted regions)	Donor-led projects (small, fragmented)
<i>Job Quality Focus</i>	Low (training without sustained employment)	High (paid work, stable income)	N/A (insufficient intervention)
<i>Youth Inclusion in Design</i>	X No (top-down, political interference)	Partial (consulted but not co-designed)	X No
<i>Conflict Trend</i>	INCREASED (2016-2023 protests)	DECREASED (-20% in targeted regions)	STABLE/RISING (Persistent violence)
<i>Social Cohesion</i>	DECLINING (Youth alienation reported)	IMPROVING (+20% community participation, +25% trust)	STAGNANT (High distrust, divisions persist)
<i>Theory Support: Unemployment→Conflict</i>	✓ Strongly supported	✓ Supported (but mitigated by intervention)	✓✓ Very strongly supported
<i>Theory Support: Jobs→Peace</i>	X Failed (poor implementation)	✓ Strongly supported	X Not tested (no adequate intervention)
<i>Key Lesson</i>	Implementation matters: Legal frameworks are insufficient without genuine commitment and youth inclusion	Design matters: Job quality, scale, and integration with peacebuilding strategy are critical	Political will matters: Without government commitment, conflict persists despite the youth bulge opportunity

Moderating Factors

Peacebuilding through youth employment programmes can be achieved only when four critical factors are present: decent work, effective implementation through legislation and institutions, meaningful youth engagement and participation, and a strong

commitment to good governance and political stability. These elements are lacking in Zimbabwe and Cameroon but exist in Côte d'Ivoire.

Scale and Sustainability

Zimbabwe's youth employment programs are too limited compared to Côte d'Ivoire's, which are larger and effective but rely on donor funding. Countries with youth unemployment over 35%, like Zimbabwe and Cameroon, face rising civil disorder, statistically significant at $p < .05$. Evidence from large-scale programmes shows that providing decent jobs with political support and youth involvement reduces violence. Côte d'Ivoire's trial found paid employment increased community participation by 20%-25% and cut violence by 20%. Without larger investments in decent youth jobs, instability is likely to persist.

Discussion

This section of the paper offers insight into findings derived from theoretical frameworks (6.1), compares and contrasts cases to explain differences in their development (6.2), examines the role of time and the future of the respective cases (6.3), and discusses implications for law reform as well as sustainable development (6.4-6.5), all while providing theoretical interpretations, policy recommendations, and future recommendations based on empirical evidence.

Research links the Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis and Youth Bulge Theory, showing that rapid youth population growth in places like Zimbabwe and Nigeria's Niger Delta causes marginalisation, unemployment, and increased frustration, raising violence risks (Urdal, 2006; Erighe & Garba, 2024; Mude, 2014; Yingi, 2025). When the labor market can't meet youth needs and institutions fail to address unemployment, young people are prone to joining militant groups and committing violence. Without intervention in reconciliation, redistribution, recognition, and representation, peace efforts are unlikely to succeed.

The findings corroborate the Youth Bulge Theory and Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis by demonstrating how large populations of unemployed youth who experience deprivation are more likely to engage in violent behaviour (Izzi, 2020; Selva & Negro, 2021). Furthermore, these findings indicate that job quality, rather than simply having employment, contributes to peacebuilding efforts, as insecure forms of informal employment may exacerbate grievances. In sum, employment programmes help create the conditions for peace when they align with supportive political, social, and economic contexts.

Comparative Insights: Why Did Cases Diverge?

Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, and Zimbabwe show divergent outcomes despite similar demographics. In 2010, Zimbabwe's youth employment efforts failed due to limited scope, political interference, and a focus on skills over direct jobs. Côte d'Ivoire's successful program had a strong theory of change, emphasised paid employment, had political support, and engaged youth. But its sustainability depends on donor funding. Cameroon faces issues like corruption, conflict, weak resolve, and exclusion. These cases show youth employment works best when adapted to local contexts and political settings.

Temporal Dynamics and Long-Term Trajectories

The studies conducted in Côte d'Ivoire indicate that having a paid job reduces deprivation and establishes inter-group trust and cohesion after the initial period of suspicion between the groups involved. Trust and cohesion established through paid work occur only through sustained jobs, i.e., jobs with long-term stability, not temporary work. In Zimbabwe, the high levels of unemployment have resulted in a "lost generation," with cyclical effects that generate an ongoing cycle of violence and discourage investment. On the other hand, in Côte d'Ivoire, the establishment of a stable job has helped create a positive cycle of increased trust, opportunity, and peace. Overall, large-scale, long-term, and high-quality employment is required to break the cycle of poverty rather than relying solely on short-term, small-scale interventions.

Implications for Law and Sustainable Development: Legal Reforms

The study concludes that effective peacebuilding must be supported by long-term legal and policy reforms, rather than short-term measures. Although the African Youth Charter provides a strong foundation, weak enforcement and the limited involvement of young people hinder its overall effectiveness in many countries (e.g., Zimbabwe and Cameroon). In contrast, Côte d'Ivoire has demonstrated that proper implementation can have a very positive impact on youth employment opportunities. The report identifies primary barriers to youth employment, including the failure to implement the Charter into national law properly; a lack of clarity on how to implement youth participation; and the allocation of less than 1% of national government budgets to youth employment initiatives. To increase youth employment, the Charter must be implemented into national law through proper protocols, young people must have a formal means of representation, minimum allocations for youth employment funding must be set, efforts to create decent work must be increased, youth employment must be linked to peace and security agendas, greater accountability must be achieved, and structural barriers to youth employment must be removed. Ultimately, turning Africa's large youth population into a force for peace will require significant legal reforms, continued support for policy implementation, and a system of equal decent work for young people.

Policy Design and Implementation

The development of policies on youth employment and African peacebuilding has been aspirational and faces many challenges. Existing frameworks like the African Youth Charter and national youth policies are mostly theoretical and haven't been effectively translated into coordinated action. Challenges include inadequate funding, lack of feedback to youth applicants, limited rural coverage, poor inter-agency coordination, and restrictive conditions on grants and loans (IOE-EMP, 2024). Training institutions also do not align with labour market needs or integrate well with youth employment strategies. To improve, recommendations include strengthening stakeholder coordination, decentralising TVET for rural youth, expanding public works, and improving data collection for evidence-based policy-making (IOE-EMP, 2024). Importantly, policy focus should shift from job quantity to job quality, as poor jobs hinder peacebuilding and may worsen grievances (Izzi, 2020).

Youth Inclusion in Peace Processes

Despite increasing recognition of youth's role in peacebuilding, their participation is limited and often symbolic. Structural barriers include exclusion, limited resources, and lack of frameworks for youth representation in peace negotiation and implementation (ACCORD, 2023; Ray, 2024). Initiatives like the African Union's Youth for Peace Programme aim to include youth voices, but practical mechanisms are scarce. Youth-led organisations can provide valuable analysis and responses, but their capacity is underused (ACCORD, 2023). Recommendations include: establishing quotas or standards for youth participation; providing accessible funding; engaging youth throughout peace processes; and supporting youth leadership and accountability.

Recommendations

Leveraging the Youth Bulge as an Opportunity for Peacebuilding

This research suggests that African governments take steps to domesticate and enforce the African Youth Charter by creating and implementing laws that will bind them to the Charter's commitments. This will be accomplished through the following actions:

- i. The creation of national legislation that will translate the commitments made under the Charter into a binding domestic legal framework
- ii. The establishment of independent monitoring agencies, which will prepare and publish annual compliance reports on the effectiveness of government efforts to implement the provisions of the Charter
- iii. The allocation of a minimum of 5% of the national budget to youth employment programmes
- iv. Providing organisations representing young people with the legal capacity to initiate lawsuits against the government
- v. Submitting to the African Union an annual compliance report, with the possibility of losing the right to vote in the African Union after three years of non-compliance.

Ethiopia has established a partial model for how a state can effectively domesticate and operationalise the African Youth Charter by incorporating its provisions into a national youth policy and establishing dedicated budget lines for them.

Integrating Youth Employment Programs into Peacebuilding Frameworks

Youth employment initiatives should be context-sensitive, evidence-based, and address drivers of violence, focusing on creating employment and social cohesion. Employment programs should prioritize decent work, especially for youth in the informal sector. Youth leadership and inclusion must be integrated into peace and governance. Proposals include strengthening legal protections, increasing access to skills, finance, and markets, respecting labour rights, and ensuring accountability. Enhancing regional collaboration, promoting cross-border migration, regional value chains, and mobilizing international support are also key. These measures aim to ensure fair treatment, access to capital, mentorship, market information, and transparency. They support scaling youth-led peacebuilding and employability efforts across borders.

Program Design Principles from Evidence

The differences between the results in Côte d'Ivoire and Zimbabwe highlight four important principles for developing youth employment programs that will effectively support peacebuilding:

- i. Programs focusing on quality of jobs, providing youth with stable, dignified, paid employment and future opportunities, effectively support their grievances. In contrast, programs offering only low-wage, insecure jobs or training do not.
- ii. Meaningful Scale: Effective programs reach at least 10% of the target youth in the intervention area, affecting community stability and norms. Weak programs cover less than 1%.
- iii. Youth involvement in program design and governance is vital for relevance and legitimacy. Successful programs include youth via advisory boards, participatory needs assessments, and co-design. When youth are token members or programs rely solely on bureaucratic processes, it reduces their relevance, legitimacy, and accountability.
- iv. Employment as part of peacebuilding involves integrating jobs with peace education and opportunities for youth from conflicting groups to interact, emphasizing that employment is more than just an economic issue.

Table 2. Summary of Key Recommendations

<i>Area</i>	<i>Recommendation</i>	<i>Specific Actions</i>	<i>Responsible Actors</i>	<i>Timeline</i>
<i>Legal & Policy</i>	Domesticate the African Youth Charter with enforceable provisions	• Incorporate into national law with budget allocations. • Establish independent monitoring bodies. • Create legal enforcement mechanisms.	National parliaments, Ministries of Justice, and the African Union	2026-2028
<i>Program Design</i>	Emphasise job quality in all interventions	• Set minimum wage standards for youth programs • Provide paid employment, not just training • Link to sustainable employment pathways	Ministries of Labour/Youth, ILO, Program implementers	Immediate (all new programs)
<i>Youth Inclusion</i>	Mandate 30% youth participation in peace/governance bodies	• Establish quota requirements in legislation • Provide capacity building for youth representatives • Ensure decision-making authority (not observers)	National governments, the AU, and the Regional Economic Communities	2026-2027
<i>Scale & Coverage</i>	Reach a minimum of 10% of youth in intervention regions	• Calculate target populations; set coverage goals	Ministries of Finance,	Phase in 2026-2030

		- Secure adequate funding for scale - Phase expansion based on evidence	Development partners	
<i>Integration</i>	Integrate youth employment into all peace processes	- Require youth employment chapters in peace agreements - Allocate 15% of post-conflict reconstruction to youth - Include in DDR programs	Mediators, UN peacekeeping, AU, and Regional organisations	Immediate (all new peace processes)
<i>Monitoring</i>	Establish rigorous evaluation requirements	- Mandate RCTs or quasi-experimental designs for programs >\$1M - Measure peacebuilding outcomes, not just employment - Require 18+ month follow-up	Development partners, Research institutions, and Evaluation units	Immediate (policy requirement)
<i>Financing</i>	Allocate a minimum of 5% of the national budget to youth employment	- Enact budget legislation with minimum allocations - Create dedicated youth employment funds - Mobilise private sector matching funds	Parliaments, Ministries of Finance	2026 budget cycle
<i>Regional Cooperation</i>	Establish the AU Youth Employment and Peace Facility	- Create a regional fund pooling national contributions - Provide technical assistance to countries - Facilitate cross-border programs	African Union, African Development Bank, Member states	2026-2027
<i>Private Sector</i>	Incentivise youth hiring through tax credits	- Offer a 50% tax credit for hiring youth (ages 18-35) - Require youth apprenticeship quotas for government contracts - Support youth entrepreneurship (access to finance, mentoring)	Revenue authorities, Private sector, Banks	2026-2028
<i>Capacity Building</i>	Train policymakers and program managers on the employment-peacebuilding nexus	- Develop AU training curriculum - Establish centres of excellence in 5 regions - Provide scholarships for youth to study peacebuilding	African Union, Universities, ILO, UNDP	2026-2030

Conclusion

This research illustrates that youth unemployment has broad implications for peacebuilding across Africa. Drawing on 30 years of composite data from regression analysis of 24 countries, complemented by case studies on Zimbabwe, Côte d'Ivoire,

and Cameroon, the findings show that youth unemployment can cause acts of violence among young men; however, this effect of unemployment is only applicable when other social interventions are not present. Thus, well-designed youth employment programs, such as those developed through Randomised Controlled Trials, can support peace. Côte d'Ivoire's RCT found that cash-for-work programs significantly increased participation and community trust by 17-25%, while reducing violence among participants by approximately 20%. The opposite held for the Zimbabwe program: it was initiated to reach approximately 0.1% of the youth population; it primarily excluded young people from the labour market; it was politically interfered with; and it included training with no provision for actual employment. The authors of the study identified five critical components necessary for the success of youth employment programs: (i) Decent Work: referring to secure jobs that are also dignified and appropriately compensated, as opposed to what are termed 'bad jobs.' (ii) High Quality of Implementation: ensuring the highest quality of implementation across all program components; (iii) Scale: refers to ensuring a minimum of approximately 10% of the youth population living in the target area should be served by the program (must be at least 10%); (iv) Youth Participation in Governance: refers to including youth in the governance of their program; (v) Political Will and Good Governance: refers to establishing the political will to develop the necessary programs for youth employment and establishing responsible governance. Time is a critical element when considering youth unemployment. The research indicates the following relationship between time and youth unemployment: short-term working together coalesces (group bonding) while also developing mistrust towards outsiders, whereas mid- and long-term (sustained commitment) lead to social cohesion, reducing stress among youth and enhancing inter-group trust. Therefore, to develop sustainable pathways toward peace, permanent jobs must be created through the development of locally owned, sustainable businesses, not just temporary employment.

Finally, this research illustrates that Africa has a critical decision to make regarding youth unemployment and the resulting instability that will occur if they do not invest and provide an avenue for creating decent access to employment, inclusive governance for young people, and youth-centred peacebuilding in order to convert the youth bulge into a demographic asset rather than creating an environment with potential for violent conflict. The evidence is convincing, and the way forward is clear. What happens next depends on the choices made today, which will shape the future.

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