

SUPPORTING THE WESTERN
BALKANS' COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP
ON RECONCILIATION: BUILDING
CAPACITY AND MOMENTUM FOR
THE REGIONAL YOUTH
COOPERATION OFFICE (RYCO)
[PBF/IRF-250]

FINAL PROJECT EVALUATION REPORT

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Executive Summary

The UN Joint Project *Supporting the Western Balkans' Collective Leadership on Reconciliation: building capacity and momentum for the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO)* was an initiative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), financed by the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund through its Immediate Response Facility (IRF).

Established in 2017, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) is an intergovernmental institution to promote youth mobility, intercultural learning, peacebuilding and reconciliation among Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo¹, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

The project had four components (or outputs). Output 1, led by UNICEF, focused on strengthening the capacities of schools in intercultural dialogue. Output 2, led by UNFPA, focused on strengthening the capacities of youth groups and grassroots organisations to be actively engaged in peacebuilding. Output 3, led by UNDP focused on RYCO's institutional strengthening, and provided direct support to RYCO's grant-making facility. Output 4, led by UNDP and UNFPA, aimed to strengthen the evidence base on youth perspectives on peace and security, and promote youth voices through different communication and advocacy activities.

The Joint Project was a ground-breaking intervention in several ways. It brought together the expertise of three UN agencies in support of RYCO, a regional institution with a unique mandate to engage the youth of the Western Balkans in peacebuilding and reconciliation. It was one of the first UN initiatives to look at the Western Balkans as a whole, starting at a time when the UN did not have a strategic framework for the sub-region.

The project was highly ambitious, with multiple and overlapping layers of complexity, being a *joint* as well as a *regional* project. On top of this complexity in design, the second half of the project was implemented under the extremely difficult circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic, which challenged the very assumptions on which the project was built (improve mobility and inter-group dialogue by promoting quality contact and encouraging friendship among young people) and forced a complete overhaul of most activities to adapt them to the new online reality.

Two key pathways to impact were identified for the project. The first pathway involved strengthening RYCO's ability to function effectively in its mission. This was to be achieved by supporting RYCO to put in place strong internal *systems and procedures*; access to *networks* of peace actors that can serve as partners; *tools and methodologies* that can be used to promote peacebuilding work; and *greater knowledge and understanding* of youth perceptions and priorities around peace and social cohesion.

The second pathway involves working directly with young people and other key actors (such as teachers) to facilitate inter-group contact and greater awareness and understanding of peace-

¹ References to Kosovo should be understood to be in the context of UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999). For RYCO, this designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with Security Council Resolution 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

related issues. As a result of this improved engagement, it was expected that more schools, organisations and individuals will become active in peacebuilding and reconciliation, and form partnerships and collaborations that go beyond 'inherited' routes.

The project was firmly grounded in the contact hypothesis, i.e., the notion that the quality and quantity of intergroup contact reduces individuals' unfavourable outgroup attitudes. Key to the project strategy was working with groups of self-selected individuals, who already have a strong interest and motivation to be part of such activities. The expectation (which represented a key assumption of the project's Theory of Change) was that a positive catalytic effect would be unleashed, with benefits gradually spreading beyond these selected groups (what was referred to as a 'snowballing' or 'cascading' effect).

The evaluation found the project to be highly relevant to the region, and aligned with national priorities of Western Balkans governments. This relevance was primarily linked to the support for RYCO, a regional institution with widely recognised potential for peacebuilding in the region by virtue of its inter-governmental nature. By supporting RYCO, the project directly contributed to advancing regional cooperation, which is a stated priority of all Western Balkans governments and closely linked to the process of EU accession.

The project had a broad conceptualisation of peace - in line with the notion of 'positive peace' - and as such it was relevant to all national contexts. It directly addressed dynamics of polarisation, lack of contact and prejudice towards 'the other', which are present across the Western Balkans, albeit with different manifestations. The project had a positive rationale for engaging youth - recognising the important and positive contribution that young people make as actors of peace, justice and reconciliation- in line with UNSCR 2250. It also recognised, and sought to address, the challenge of reaching out to young people from all walks of life - including both young women and young men, young people from disadvantaged background and marginalised groups.

The project originated from a joint UN/ RYCO idea, with RYCO leading in the identification of priority areas of support. The timeframe was very compressed for such an ambitious and complex project – yet despite time pressure and the enormous additional challenges related to Covid-19, each of the four outputs performed well against its original workplan. Each of the four outputs was contextually relevant and had clear internal logic; however, outputs were largely self-contained in design and implementation, resulting in limited cross-fertilisation.

Collaboration between the RYCO and UN partners was generally positive, with some challenges mostly due to competing bureaucratic requirements and timelines. Overall, the degree of engagement and ownership of the project by Country Offices other than Albania was low, although with differences among partner agencies.

The project achieved its objectives in terms of institutional strengthening of RYCO, which has now established procedures in the areas of Monitoring and Evaluation, Risk Assessment and Management, Human Resources, Health and Safety. Yet a concern is that these systems and procedures pose excessively demanding requirements on the kind of actors (schools and grassroots organisations) that RYCO aims to engage in its peacebuilding mission.

In addition to its direct impact, the UN project also had a recognised catalytic impact, providing RYCO with the credibility and trustworthiness to attract funding from other development partners.

The project has certainly had an impact on direct participants in strengthening their motivation, skills and confidence to be actors in peacebuilding. Even if constrained by an online format, the project managed to facilitate quality contact and connections. The indirect impact ‘beyond’ participants is more difficult to assess, particularly within the time limits and methodological constraints of the evaluation. Given the limited duration of the project, and the circumstances of its implementation, building on the initial positive impact on participants will require further support.

The project strived to be gender-sensitive in design and implementation. The evaluation could not find evidence that the project had an impact in advancing gender equality in the region – although this was probably too ambitious a goal given the short duration of the project, the absence of gender-specific activities, and the circumstances of implementation. A gender lens was incorporated in the activities and methodologies, and some grants and ‘best innovative ideas’ focused specifically on gender-related themes. As a general trend, project activities seem to have attracted more women than men. Young people in rural areas faced the greatest challenges in participation in project activities.

The Joint Project has highlighted the need, timeliness, and potential of peacebuilding interventions in the Western Balkans. A number of recommendations emerge from this evaluation to inform future interventions in the Western Balkans:

- Future interventions should strengthen efforts to reach out to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and minority groups, as well as youth living in rural areas.
- Future interventions should continue to support the involvement of girls and young women, while recognising and addressing the challenges related to prevalent notions of masculinities that prevent young men from participating in peacebuilding and social cohesion activities.
- RYCO, UNICEF and other UN agencies should build on the work started with the teachers’ group, and expand support to ‘whole of schools’ including school administration and school communities.
- RYCO, UNFPA and other UN agencies should continue to nurture the Y-PEER group of trainers, and identify ways in which they can contribute to ongoing and future peacebuilding efforts.
- RYCO, UNDP and UNFPA should continue to promote the Shared Futures report, finding new ways to implement the advocacy component of the project after the Covid-19 pandemic subsides.

For RYCO, the project evaluation identifies three priority areas for reflection in its ongoing Strategic Planning process:

- Reflect on the persistent tension between administrative and financial rigour, on the one hand, and engagement of grassroots organisations, on the other hand.
- Undertake a systematic mapping and analysis of its grants, not only against its strategic priorities but also (in more detail) against thematic areas of work.
- Consider ways in which the RYCO regional approach can be complemented by national-level peacebuilding strategies.

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List of acronyms

DAC	Development Assistance Committee
EQ	Evaluation Question
HACT	Harmonised Approach to Cash Transfer
IRF	Immediate Response Facility
IRH	Istanbul Regional Hub (UNDP)
JP	Joint Project
LBO	Local Branch Office
OC	Open Call
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PBF	UN Peacebuilding Fund
RYCO	Regional Youth Cooperation Office
ToC	Theory of Change
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNPBSO	United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
YPS	Youth, Peace and Security

1. Introduction

The UN Joint Project *Supporting the Western Balkans' Collective Leadership on Reconciliation: building capacity and momentum for the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO)* was an initiative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), financed by the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund through its Immediate Response Facility (IRF).

Established in 2017, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) is an intergovernmental institution to promote youth mobility, intercultural learning, peacebuilding and reconciliation among Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo², Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia (collectively known as the Western Balkans³). The project was managed primarily from the UN partners' Country Offices in Albania, where the headquarters of RYCO are located. RYCO was the implementing partner for the project.

The project had four components (or outputs). Output 1, led by UNICEF, focused on strengthening the capacities of schools in intercultural dialogue. Output 2, led by UNFPA, focused on strengthening the capacities of youth groups and grassroots organisations to be actively engaged in peacebuilding. Output 3, led by UNDP focused on RYCO's institutional strengthening, and provided direct support to RYCO's grant-making facility. Output 4, led by UNDP and UNFPA, aimed to strengthen the evidence base on youth perspectives on peace and security, and promote youth voices through different communication and advocacy activities.

The project started on November 7th, 2018 and came to an end on May 7th, 2021, after being granted two six-month extensions. The first was a costed extension to allow for the inclusion of Output 4; the second was a no-cost extension to compensate for delays due to the 2019 earthquake in Albania and the Covid-19 pandemic.

This independent final evaluation was commissioned to ensure accountability and to capture key learning from the project. The objective of the evaluation was to assess the extent to which the UN Joint Project achieved its intended *peacebuilding outcome*, described in the project document as “*Social Cohesion and Reconciliation – as expressed by increasing embracing of diversity, attitudes of tolerance and reduced prejudice by youth – is enhanced across the Western Balkans*”.

An initial list of questions was included in the terms of reference for the assignment. On this basis, during the inception period, an evaluation framework was developed (see Annex 2), based on the OECD evaluation criteria, and gender equality as a cross-cutting lens. The key evaluation questions (EQs) are:

² References to Kosovo should be understood to be in the context of UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999). For RYCO, this designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with Security Council Resolution 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

³ In this report, we use Western Balkans to refer to the six RYCO Contracting Parties; other definitions include Croatia.

- EQ1: Did the joint project respond to key peacebuilding priorities in the Western Balkans? (*Relevance; Coherence*)
- EQ2: Was the project well managed? (*Efficiency*)
- EQ3: Was the joint project successful in delivering against its intended objectives? (*Effectiveness*)
- EQ4: Are there initial indications that the joint project has led to enhanced social cohesion and reconciliation in the Western Balkans? If so, are these changes sustainable? (*Impact; Sustainability*).
- EQ5: To what extent did the project support the engagement of young women and girls in peacebuilding and reconciliation in the region, and contribute to addressing inequality and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation? (*Gender responsiveness*).

The evaluation team included six national consultants and one international lead consultant.⁴ The national consultants ensured the relevance of the evaluation framework, methodology and process to their respective contexts, and had responsibility for national level data collection and analysis. The lead evaluator ensured the coherence and consistency of approaches, the comparability of findings, and led on engagement with project partners and the UNPFB, as well as the collation of findings for the final report.

The Covid-19 pandemic had a considerable impact on the project at all levels. The evaluation gave particular attention to the way in which the project had responded and adapted to the new reality of Covid-19, and particularly whether:

- The project had remained *relevant* and *coherent* in view of the new Covid-19 reality (EQ1)
- The project was *efficient* in adapting to the new Covid-19 reality (EQ2)
- The project managed to achieve its *intended objectives*, or modified its objectives considering the Covid-19 reality (EQ3)
- The Covid-19 pandemic affected *impact and sustainability* of the project (EQ4)
- The project acknowledged and addressed the *gendered impacts* of the Covid-19 pandemic (EQ5).

The evaluation approach was built on emerging good practice in assessing the peacebuilding impact of youth programmes, particularly the *PBF Guidance Note on Youth and Peacebuilding* (see Box 1). This highlights the project's *rationale* for focusing on youth; its *targeting*; and its *gender* dimension.

⁴ The team was composed by Valeria Izzi (International Consultant and Team Leader), Emil Angelov (National Consultant for North Macedonia), Mirna Dabic Davidovic (National Consultant for Bosnia-Herzegovina), Nikoleta Djukanovic (National Consultant for Montenegro), Igor Jojkic (National Consultant for Serbia), Ardita Metaj Dika (National Consultant for Kosovo) and Merita Poni (National Consultant for Albania).

UN Peacebuilding Fund: Guidance Note on Youth and Peacebuilding

The final evaluation of a youth/peacebuilding project should assess:

- The relevance of the rationale for focusing on youth (negative / positive rationale)
- The relevance of the groups targeted by the project and the selection process (“vulnerable youth”, “at risk youth”, urban/rural, ethnic groups, socio-economic groups, religious or political affiliation, etc.)
- The gender dimension of the project: were gender issues considered in project rationale, design, and implementation? Was there an effort to involve young men / young women equally? Does the project address harmful gender norms and/or facilitate the transformation of gender roles that can contribute to peacebuilding?
- The peacebuilding outcome: what was it?

Box 1 – PBF Guidance on evaluating youth/peacebuilding projects (source: PBF, 2019)

Structure of the evaluation report

The report starts with a description of the methodology and process of the evaluation (Section 2). It then provides a summary of the national-level conflict analyses (Section 3), which serve the main frame for addressing EQ1 (relevance and coherence). Section 4 gives an overview of the project, its pathways to impact and underpinning assumptions. Section 5 summarises the evaluation’s findings for each EQ. Section 6 offers concluding reflections and recommendations.

2. Methodology and process

The evaluation took place in the period April-July 2021.⁵ It was kick-started with an *inception meeting*, attended by key staff from RYCO and the three UN agencies (UNDP Albania, UNICEF Albania, UNFPA Albania, UNFPA EECA Regional Office and UNDP Istanbul Regional Hub). The meeting provided an opportunity for the lead consultant to meet the project partners, and to gain an initial understanding of their expectations for the evaluation. The inception meeting was complemented by *output-specific meetings with RYCO and lead UN agencies*, and an introductory meeting with the PBF. A **desk review** of project documentation was started during the inception phase and continued throughout the evaluation.

An inception report was prepared by lead consultant as the first deliverable of the evaluation. Its main purpose was to summarise the key findings from the inception phase and outline the approach, key questions, methodology and process for the implementation phase. The inception report also included a draft version of a retrospective Theory of Change for the project, which informed the evaluation and was validated through discussions with project partners throughout the process (see Section 4 and Annex 2).

Conflict analysis

In the implementation phase, national-level **conflict analyses** were carried out, through a combination of *rapid literature reviews* and *semi-structured interviews with expert observers*.

A common protocol for literature searches was developed to ensure a degree of comparability among literature reviews.⁶ In most cases snowballing, citation tracking, and additional targeted searches were used to complement the start set. Over 150 publications were reviewed (see Bibliography).

A total of 19 interviews were conducted as part of the conflict analysis, covering a cross-section of subjects from youth organisations, civil society organisations, academia, think tanks, and journalism (11 women and 8 men). Informants were selected based on their expertise on issues related to youth and/or peace in their respective national contexts (and/or in the region); they had no significant direct involvement with the project or with RYCO.

National-level briefs were written up by the national consultants based on a common template, to allow comparability of findings while capturing national-level specificities. Interviews and literature review at the regional level were conducted to complement the national-level analyses. More information about the methodology, as well as the topic guide, can be found in Annex 4. The findings of the analysis are summarised in Section 3.

Event observation

The evaluation team had the opportunity to remotely attend two project events:

⁵ The lead consultant was contracted in late April and the national consultants in early May.

⁶ A search was conducted on the engines JSTOR (for academic papers) and DuckDuckGo (for grey literature) for the key words “youth, conflict, peace” for a specified time period (2011-2021). First-page results were considered for each search, and the resulting list was manually screened for relevance, eliminating any entries that did not fit the purpose of the analysis.

- The *Regional Conference on Youth and Peacebuilding* (May 11th-12th), organised by RYCO and UNFPA to discuss the impact of the joint project, showcase the tools and methodologies developed, and bring together key stakeholders to discuss opportunities to continue the work; and
- The *Shared Futures: youth for sustainable peace in the Western Balkans* event (May 18th-19th, 2021), a regional dialogue which centred around the findings of the Youth Perception Study (Output 4) and brought together youth, UN and civil society to discuss the key issues emerging from the study.

Key Subject Interviews

Interviews used a semi-structured format, with a common template to allow comparability and triangulation of findings. National consultants were encouraged to ask follow-up questions to tease out specific details for each national context, and to complement the common template with additional questions of national relevance. Two main groups of subjects were engaged through interviews: *project partners* (UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA and RYCO) and *project participants*.

Interviews with project partners were conducted at the central project level in Albania (with UN agencies and RYCO headquarters in Albania), at the national level (with UNDP and UNFPA Country Offices and RYCO Local Branch Offices), and with the UNDP Istanbul Regional Hub (IRH). A total of 31 interviews were conducted with project partners (19 women and 12 men).

Three groups of project participants were targeted through interviews, for a total of 52 interviewees:

- Teacher group (Output 1), for a total of 19 KIIs (15 women, 4 men). The teachers were based in Albania (4); Bosnia and Herzegovina (3); Kosovo (2); Montenegro (4); North Macedonia (3) and Serbia (4). They worked in general education (9), vocational education (10) or other types of school (1). In terms of subjects, interviewed teachers taught Social Sciences (4); National languages (4); Foreign Languages (7); Math/Sciences (4) and Music (1).
- Y-PEER Trainers (Output 2), for a total of 16 KIIs (13 women, 3 men), with the following breakdown: Albania (3); Bosnia and Herzegovina (3); Kosovo (3); Montenegro (1); North Macedonia (2); Serbia (4).
- Youth Advisory Group (Output 4), for a total of 16 KIIs (8 women, 8 men), with the following national breakdown: Albania (3), Bosnia and Herzegovina (2), Kosovo (3), Montenegro (3), North Macedonia (3), and Serbia (2).

Online surveys

Two online surveys were carried out, using the SurveyMonkey platform. The first survey targeted *grantees of the second RYCO Open Call (OC2)*, which was co-funded by UNDP as part of the joint project (Output 2). The survey was available in English as well as in each of the official languages in the sub-region (Albanian, Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Macedonian, Serbian). The survey was sent to the main applicant for the grant. 33 responses were received (over 85% of the 38 completed grants for OC2). Most respondents (27, or 81%) identified as female. Only a small percentage of them (9, or 27%) fell into the youth age category.⁷

⁷ Respondents were based in Albania (8), Bosnia and Herzegovina (6), Kosovo (3), Montenegro (3), North Macedonia (6), and Serbia (8). In terms of type of organisation that the respondents were representing, 23 were CSOs, 8 were schools, and 1 was a CSO applying on behalf of a school.

The second survey targeted *young people who participated in the Regional Youth Peace Lab activity* (Output 4). In this case, the survey was only sent in English, and received 18 responses (slightly under 20% of the total).⁸ Respondents were equally split between males and females. Most of them (10) were students, while 6 were employed (full or part-time) and 2 were looking for employment. In terms of current place of residence, 8 respondents were in capital cities, 7 in other cities or towns, and 2 in villages or rural areas.

Data analysis

National-level data analysis was conducted by the national consultants, who produced consolidated qualitative analyses of participants' interviews using a common template. The lead consultant then undertook a meta-analysis of national-level reports, which allowed for identification of common themes as well as differences and specificities.

Transcripts of interviews with UN partners were reviewed by the lead consultant, and inductive coding was used to identify key emerging themes, allowing for data triangulation across data sources, national contexts, and project partners. Data from the online surveys was extracted in Excel format for quantitative analysis. Open-ended questions were analysed qualitatively.

Preliminary findings were presented to the UN partners, RYCO and the PBF on June 30th. This report incorporates the feedback received during and after the presentation. Key findings were also presented as part of the final project event on July 29th.⁹

Ethical considerations

Given the still-prevalent Covid-19 context, most interviews were conducted online (through Zoom or Skype). Seven interviews were conducted in person in line with national Covid-19 regulations (in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia).

Measures were taken to ensure confidentiality of the process and protect the identity of participants. Informed consent was obtained verbally from participants during interviews, through verbal disclosure of the nature and purpose of the data collection. In some cases, interviews were recorded, with previous consent of participants, and the recording was then erased after transcription. Consent has been obtained for all named quotes and references to interviews in this report. Confidentiality and non-attribution were also guaranteed in the online surveys.

All informants were given the option to respond to interviews in the national language of their choice or in English. Grantees were also given a choice of language when filling in the online survey.

The evaluation did not engage with minors.

⁸ Respondents were based in Albania (2), Bosnia and Herzegovina (3), Kosovo (3), Montenegro (1), North Macedonia (3), and Serbia (6).

⁹ The final project event used a hybrid format (with some participants attending in person in Tirana, and others joining remotely). Its aim was to present the achievements, challenges, and recommendations for future actions, based on the final project evaluation report.

Caveats and limitations

The evaluation had a short timeframe, with data collection taking place over a period of approximately four weeks in June 2021. The combination of limited time and online modalities led to some significant limitations, in particular:

- *Limited involvement of young people.* The evaluation team only engaged with direct participants in the project, i.e., the Y-PEER trainers (Output 2), the Youth Advisory Group (Output 4) and the participants in the Regional Youth Peace Lab (Output 4). These were young people who were selected by the project through a competitive process, and therefore did not constitute a representative sample of the youth population in the region. The possibility of small in-person focus groups was considered by the evaluation team to engage with a broader set of young people (participants of local workshops and ‘best innovative ideas’ grants). The idea was eventually abandoned due to the risk that this would pose to participants and their families and communities. As a result, the sample of young people consulted in this evaluation is not illustrative of the diversity of youth views and perspectives in the region.
- *Limited perspectives of school stakeholders.* As part of its assessment of the work done by the project on peacebuilding education, the evaluation team interviewed teachers who had been involved in the project but was not able to consult with other key stakeholders (students; school principals; school administrators; parents) due to time limitations.
- *Limited engagement with Country Offices.* The compressed timeline also meant that the engagement with Country Offices (other than Albania) was limited to the UNDP and UNFPA focal points for this project. UNICEF country offices were not involved in project implementation and therefore not included in the interviews. These limitations constrained the extent to which the evaluation can draw conclusions regarding the Country Offices’ perceptions of the relevance and impact of the project.
- *Lack of in-depth analysis of RYCO grants.* The evaluation conducted a desk review of documentation related to RYCO grants and reached out to grantees through an online survey; however, given the limited timeframe, it was not possible to undertake an in-depth assessment of individual grants. As a consequence, the evaluation provides limited insights into the peacebuilding impact and gender-responsiveness of individual grants.

3. Analysis of context

The aim of the conflict analyses was to place the project in context and contribute to an assessment of the relevance and coherence of the project (EQ1). As described above in the methodology section, the conflict analysis consisted of a rapid literature review and interviews with a cross-section of experts from youth organisations, civil society, academia, think tanks and journalism. The analysis also draws on interviews with the youth representatives on the RYCO Board, as well as broader engagement with project partners and participants. Findings from the *Shared Futures* report - produced as part of Output 4 of the project - are also referenced in this analysis.

‘Conflict’ and ‘peace’ in the Western Balkans

While direct violence has been rare for the last two decades, Western Balkans’ societies remain divided along multiple fault lines. The legacy of past conflicts still looms large and intermingles with new dynamics and symptoms of fragility - a situation that has been described as a ‘negative’ rather than ‘positive’ peace (Kulkova, 2019; Simić, 2019).¹⁰

The national-level conflict analyses highlighted **common trends**, as well as cross-border interconnections, regarding peace and stability in the region. Many observers point to unresolved inter-group issues that lead to **polarisation of political narratives**, often predicated around divisive lines of ‘us’ versus ‘the other’ (Clarke-Habibi, 2020). Both official and alternative media often play a role in propagating these divisive narratives.¹¹

Hate speech¹² has been noted as a key problem in all cases. Social media platforms provide an opportunity for discriminatory language, conveying negative comments towards others. While the targets of hate speech vary, often depending on a group’s relative status as ‘majority’ or ‘minority’, the **Roma population** is the object of derogatory speech and discriminatory behaviour across the Western Balkans (Robayo-Abril & Millan, 2019).

The United Nations, European Union and NGOs have repeatedly raised concerns about the relativisation (or outright denial) of war crimes, and the glorification of war criminals in different parts of the region (Delauney, 2021; Radovanovic, 2020; Fridman, 2018; Gadzo, 2021; Stojanovic & Kajosevic, 2021). Some instances of violence by extremist groups have been noted. In Serbia, violence flare-ups coincide with iconic dates such as February 2017 (anniversary of the Kosovo’s 2008 Declaration of Independence) and between March 24 and June 10 (the anniversary of the 1999 NATO air campaign). The cultural exchange festival between Belgrade and Pristina, known as “Mirëdita, dobar dan” (May and June)¹³ has also been the object of attacks (Fridman, 2019).

¹⁰ We refer here to the distinction, originally made by Johan Galtung, between negative peace (the absence of direct violence) and positive peace (a situation in which peace is maintained on a reciprocal and consensual basis, and conflict is constructively addressed through mutually agreed mechanisms and systems (Galtung, 1996).

¹¹ Dangers to journalists of independent media outlets have been reported in the cases of Serbia and Kosovo.

¹² Hate speech is defined here, in line with the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech (2019), as “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of [...] their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor”
<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/UN%20Strategy%20and%20Plan%20of%20Action%20on%20Hate%20Speech%2018%20June%20SYNOPSIS.pdf>.

¹³ The “Mirëdita, dobar dan” festival is a unique event that has been taking place every year since 2014. The main aim of the festival is presenting Kosovo’s active cultural scene in Belgrade, to facilitate an exchange of

Homophobia and open discrimination against LGBTQ+ people have been reported in all cases, although the specific forms and degrees of this vary. In Serbia, open attacks against LGBTQ+ individuals and activists are a significant concern, with events such as Pride always treated as high-risk. **Hooliganism** plays a key role in mobilising homophobic feelings (Pavasovic Trost & Kovacevic, 2013; Mikus, 2015).

Homophobia is underpinned by social norms of masculinity that are predicated upon ‘toughness’, ‘being in control’, and not being scared of violence. Studies have found that the experience of violence is diffuse among young men in the Western Balkans, in the form of peer violence (taking place in schools, streets and public places), violence against those perceived as ‘different’, and **violence against women** - predominantly domestic violence and violence against intimate partners (Barker & Pawlak, 2015: 7).

Challenges around peace have intensified during the **Covid-19** pandemic, with vulnerable groups being disproportionately affected both by the virus and by the impact of mitigating measures (Carnegie Europe, 2020). The pandemic has worsened gender inequality and gender-based violence, a global trend that UN Women has named ‘the shadow pandemic’.¹⁴

Youth in the Western Balkans

The region has a very young population, with Kosovo having the youngest population in Europe (65% of the population is under 30– Jovanov & Stankovski, 2020). The *Shared Futures* study found that, across the region, **young people’s trust in governments and institutions is low**, and has been further damaged during the Covid-19 pandemic. When asked to rate government, parliament, judiciary, police and media on the scale of 1 (completely dissatisfied) and 5 (completely satisfied), the average satisfaction of youth was 3 or below, with views being largely consistent across the region. Satisfaction with civil society organisation and youth organisations was more ambivalent but also generally low. The trust in institutions appear to be lower among youth compared to their parents’ generation (*Shared Futures*, 2021: 39).

The highest level of dissatisfaction is expressed with regard to employment opportunities. Levels of **youth unemployment** are very high (estimated by the World Bank at around 30% across the sub-region, about double the rate of the European Union¹⁵) and so is the push towards migration among young people (Barker & Pawlak, 2014). The *Shared Futures* report found that an average of 52% of young people say that they envisage themselves living outside the region in 10 years – yet they also express hesitations, fears of being treated as a second-class citizen abroad, and a reluctance to leave family, friends, and a familiar lifestyle (*Shared Futures*, 2021: 14).¹⁶

The under-30 generation was born during or after the end of the wars, and it is frequently said that they have absorbed divisive narratives through the tales told by their parents and grandparents. In some parts of the Western Balkans (such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo

artistic ideas and create a tradition of collaboration. Through debate, and discussions about current social and political issues, the festival seeks to contribute to a lasting normalization of the Serbia-Kosovo societal relationship.

14. For a general reflection on the impact of Covid-19 on gender equality in situations of conflict and fragility, see UNDP (2021).

15 World Bank, Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2020, March 2020.

16 Albania has the highest proportion of those expressing an interest in migration – 70 percent of young respondents said they saw themselves living abroad within a decade – followed by Kosovo (60 percent), North Macedonia (50 percent) and Montenegro (49 percent), with lower interest in Bosnia and Herzegovina (46 percent) and in Serbia, still quite high at 38 percent. (*Shared Futures*, 2021: 129).

and North Macedonia), **segregation of education** reinforces these divisions, with schooling being often determined by ethnic and linguistic affiliation, and the curriculum (particularly the teaching of history) being strongly conditioned by identity-based narratives (Krstevska-Papic & Zekolli, 2016; Goranci-Brkic, 2016); Torsti, 2009; Craig, 2016; Surk, 2018).

“Prior to this project my position was that students and young people are more open than their parents, on all these issues. However, when we started [...] the project, when we went deeper into these topics, when we scratched beneath the surface, it was clear that this was not the case. [...] They have heard everything [from their parents and grandparents] and they know nothing from their experience.” [Teacher participant]

Mobility and exchanges within the WB region are limited and mostly happen along ‘**inherited routes**’, following ethnic and linguistic lines (PBF, 2018; Popović & Gligorović, 2016: 73; RYCO 2018: 5). Young people’s own views are generally missing from policy debates and dialogues on regional cooperation; assumptions made about their needs and priorities often remain unchecked (Project document; RYCO, 2018).

Several interviewees have pointed out that the **urban/ rural divide** is crucial when it comes to perception of ‘the other’ as well as gender relations. Girls and young women are significantly more limited by patriarchal norms in their opportunities, choices and voice. Hetero- and cis-normativity is also much stronger in rural areas compared to cities.

The **European Union** remains the key strategic partner of the region, providing funding and support through various programmes (IPA, Erasmus +, etc.). Kosovo is the largest per capita recipient of EU financial aid in the world.¹⁷ The prospect of EU accession is a key driver for the Western Balkans governments, and a high priority for young people in the region. **Regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations** are key elements in the EU accession process for all Western Balkan governments (Smith et al., 2021; Petrovic & Wilson, 2021). The *Shared Futures* report found that almost half (47%) of youth across the sub-region, when asked to choose the most important factors for creating long-term peace and stability in the region, picked the EU accession as the most important factor. Response rates were very similar for young women and young men but varied highly across place and ethnicity. Overall, the lowest confidence that the EU accession process would contribute importantly to peace was found in Montenegro (45 percent) and Serbia (30 percent) – interestingly, the two countries that are furthest advanced in the EU accession process.¹⁸

Reflections on current initiatives on peacebuilding, dialogue and reconciliation

Our consultations highlighted several **ongoing initiatives** to promote peace, reconciliation, social cohesion, ‘dealing with the past’ and gender equality, mostly implemented by civil

¹⁷ <https://issat.dcaf.ch/Learn/Resource-Library/Policy-and-Research-Papers/European-Union-Assistance-to-Kosovo-related-to-the-Rule-of-Law>

¹⁸ In Bosnia and Herzegovina, youth who self-identified as Bosniak were more likely to see EU accession as a positive factor for peace than their Croat or Serb peers (55 percent, 42 percent and 33 percent respectively). In Kosovo, an overwhelming 75.5 percent of Albanian youth felt the EU accession process would be important for peace against only 6 percent of Kosovo Serbs. Similarly, in Montenegro, Albanian youth assigned importance to the EU accession process (63 percent) much more often than their peers (44 percent of those self-identifying as Montenegrin and 35 percent Serb); as they did in North Macedonia (71 percent of Albanian youth and 54 percent of Macedonian youth). In Serbia, around 23 percent of those who self-identified as Serbs compared to 53 percent of Bosniak youth saw the EU accession process as important for peace in the region. (*Shared Futures*, 2021: 89).

society with support from international agencies, donors and INGOs. Many of these initiatives specifically target young people. In the face of this richness of local initiatives, however, two key challenges have consistently been noted:

- **Initiatives are often small-scale and depend on short-term funding.** Local organisations struggle to have the continuous engagement necessary for sustainable change. Related to this point, competition for limited funding inhibits cooperation among local actors. As one external observer noted, “nobody – not even the funder - is connecting the dots”, and thus local initiatives remain scattered and do not ‘add up’. This **projectisation of peacebuilding** and a lack of a more structured and strategic approach have been highlighted as a key problem throughout the region.
- **Youth initiatives struggle to reach out beyond ‘the usual suspects’ and to engage the young people from all backgrounds.** This challenge is closely related to the short-term nature of most peacebuilding initiatives. These call for quick results, not allowing for the additional time and resources needed to meaningfully engage young people from different walks of life (beyond those who are urban and educated, can speak English and use the jargon of international actors), and – perhaps most importantly – are already interested and motivated to engage in inter-group activities.

4. Project overview

The Joint Project was a ground-breaking intervention in several ways. It brought together the expertise of three UN agencies in support of RYCO, a regional institution with a unique mandate to engage the youth of the Western Balkans in peacebuilding and reconciliation. This was one of the first UN initiatives to look at the Western Balkans as a whole, starting at a time when the UN did not have a strategic framework for the sub-region.¹⁹

The project was highly ambitious, with multiple and overlapping layers of complexity. It was a *joint project* as well as a *regional project*, involving three UN agencies and their respective Country Offices in the Western Balkans, as well as the UNDP and UNFPA regional offices in Istanbul. The project was administered by the UNDP, UNFPA and UNICEF country offices in Albania. RYCO was the project's implementing partner as well as the main target of institutional support.

On top of this complexity in design, the second half of the project was implemented under the extremely difficult circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic, which challenged the very assumptions on which the project was built (improve mobility and inter-group dialogue by promoting quality contact and encouraging friendship among young people) and forced a complete overhaul of most activities to adapt them to the new online reality.

Regional Youth Cooperation Office

The Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) is an independently functioning institutional mechanism, founded by the Western Balkans governments to promote a spirit of reconciliation and cooperation between the youth in the region.²⁰ Inspired in part by the experience of youth exchanges between France and Germany after World War II, RYCO emerged as a product of the Berlin process, an initiative to boost regional cooperation among the Western Balkans and EU integration (Moll, 2021).²¹

The agreement on the establishment of RYCO was signed by the six Prime Ministers at the Western Balkans Summit held in Paris, on 4 July 2016. It was agreed that Albania would in the same premises host the RYCO Local Branch Office and the RYCO Head Office . whereas the other local branches would be established in the capitals of other five contracting parties. RYCO has a governing board composed of the ministers of youth, as well as six youth representatives.

RYCO's vision is to support young people in the region to have a key role -and an awareness of the part they play - in building the future. In pursuit of this vision, RYCO funds a variety of projects and initiatives through competitive open calls for proposals open to civil society organisations (CSOs) as well as schools.

¹⁹ The United Nations Western Balkans Action Plan was then developed in 2019, under the Secretary General's conflict prevention platform.

²⁰ RYCO website: https://www.rycowb.org/?page_id=152.

²¹ One of the main EU Enlargement requirements is Regional Dialogue and Reconciliation. The Berlin Process was launched on August 28, 2014, by the German Chancellor Angela Merkel. EU Member States involved in the Process are Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, Slovenia and the United Kingdom. <https://berlinprocess.info/> (accessed May 7th, 2021).

The first call was launched in October 2017, encouraging CSOs and public schools to submit proposals for intercultural exchanges and/or youth civic participation that involved at least two of the Western Balkans participants. While the response to the call was enthusiastic, confirming demand for these types of activities,²² most proposed collaborations followed ethnic and language lines, and mostly came from well-established CSOs. This experience highlighted the need for targeted efforts to reach out to organisations beyond the ‘usual suspects’, and to promote cooperation beyond ‘inherited’ routes. Lessons from the first open call directly fed into the design of the UN Joint Project.²³

UN Joint Project – key facts

Funded through the Immediate Response Facility (IRF) of the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF), the Joint Project was launched on November 6th 2018 for an initial duration of 18 months (the maximum duration for IRF projects). UNDP was the convening agency and UNFPA and UNICEF were recipient agencies. The project was managed from the Albanian Country Offices of UNDP, UNFPA and UNICEF, with RYCO as its implementing partner. Two 6-month extensions were granted, thus bringing the final duration of the project to 30 months (up to May 7th, 2021²⁴). These were:

- a costed extension, bringing the total budget from the original USD 2,178,080 to USD 2,999,745, to allow for the inclusion of Output 4; and
- a no-cost extension to compensate for delays due the 2019 earthquake in Albania and Covid-19.

The three participating UN agencies all have a presence in the Western Balkans,²⁵ as well as specific expertise in the critical areas (engaging hard-to-reach youth, working with schools and grassroots organisations, and capacity development). The UNFPA focal point for the joint project also sits on the RYCO advisory board.

PBF/IRF-250: Supporting the Western Balkan’s collective leadership on reconciliation: building capacity and momentum for the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO)		
Budget (initial allocation)	USD 2,187,080	
Budget (revised allocation)	USD 2,999,745	UNDP (incl. RYCO) \$2,024,975
		UNFPA \$ 552,120
		UNICEF \$422,650
Start date	November 6th, 2018	
Original end date	May 7 th , 2020	
Actual date	May 7 th , 2021	
PBF Project modality	Immediate Response Facility	

Table 1- Project factsheet (Source: <http://mptf.undp.org/factsheet/project/00112939>)

In its final (post-extension) formulation, the joint project is composed of four outputs:

²² Over 420 applications, networking over 1300 schools and organisations in the region, were submitted.

²³ Two more calls followed, supported by the Government of Germany (OC3) and the European Union (OC4).

²⁴ An additional three months are dedicated to project closure (finalisation of the ongoing activities, preparation and submission of the final narrative and financial report, and final project evaluation).

²⁵ An exception is UNFPA not having an office in Montenegro, so in that country the UNFPA component of the project is managed directly by RYCO.

Output 1 - “Capacities of schools to access and use RYCO’s resources to undertake intercultural dialogue in the Western Balkans will be strengthened” - led by UNICEF. The output focused on enhancing inter-school cooperation, as well as increasing the capacity of schools to tackle topics of intercultural learning and dealing with the past.

The first activity implemented under this output was a mapping of educational initiatives on peacebuilding, reconciliation and related themes in the Western Balkans. The mapping aimed to identify ‘what was already there’ as well as gaps to be filled. A recommendation emerging from the mapping was the need for a pedagogical methodology for teachers on how to address sensitive topics linked to peace and conflict with their students. This led to second activity, i.e., the development of a toolkit for teachers (*Educating for intercultural dialogue, peacebuilding, constructive remembrance and reconciliation – a toolkit for teachers in the Western Balkans*).

RYCO and UNICEF then engaged a small group of teachers to test and apply the materials and create a ‘pool of excellence’ for peace education in the region. The teachers received training²⁶ as well as mentoring on planning, preparing, implementing and evaluating activities from the toolkit in their schools. In order to promote the wide use of the toolkit in the region, an online learning platform for teacher training was developed. The online platform converted the existing training resource document into a series of engaging, interactive, self-paced online learning modules, using an experiential-learning methodology to allow teachers to replicate activities with their students.²⁷

Output 2 - “Capacities of youth groups and grassroots organizations to access and use RYCO’s resources to engage in peacebuilding and social cohesion activities in the Western Balkans will be strengthened” - led by UNFPA. Under this output, a Training-of-Trainers (ToT) manual was created on youth peacebuilding and conflict transformation, which adapted the Y-PEER model of youth peer education to the specifics of peacebuilding and reconciliation.²⁸ In parallel with the finalisation of the ToT manual, a group of 21 participants was selected, through an open call. Two ToT workshops were organised, with a hybrid approach combining online training with smaller in-person meetings at national level. To put their newly acquired skills in practice, participants had the opportunity to organize and facilitate 15 local workshops in their respective communities, with support from UNFPA. The workshops reached approximately 300 participants in person and/or online. The workshops also provided the opportunity to identify 15 of the best innovative ideas that were implemented in local communities, in turn reaching approximately 600 participants.²⁹

²⁶ The first round of training was face-to-face (just before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic) and the second through a blended format of online sessions and offline assignments.

²⁷ An additional activity implemented under this output was the development of a fundraising guide and facilitation manual for schools. The aim of this was to enable schools to access funding for peace-related initiatives. The documents were finalised but were not deemed to cover all relevant aspects of financial management and fundraising for high schools RYCO works with. RYCO has decided not to use these products in their work, although the documents can be used by others, and will be used by UNICEF in other areas of its work.

²⁸ Y-PEER is a methodology for empowering young people to become agents of positive change. Instead of relying on adult ‘experts’ to tell youth what to think and do, peer education puts the experiences, ideas and creativity of youth at the centre of the learning process. The Y-PEER model was first used by UNFPA in Eastern Europe and Central Asia in the early 2000s, in particular with regard to HIV prevention. It has since been tested and refined in many countries around the world. Y-PEER uses a pyramid training model, which empowers youth to pass on knowledge, skills, and practical expertise as new young people join a peer education programme.

²⁹ Output 2 also included the development and implementation of an UN-RYCO Communication Campaign.

Output 3 - “RYCO’s capacities to enhance sustainable regional cooperation, peacebuilding and reconciliation amongst youth, through its small grants facility will be strengthened” - led by UNDP. Under this output, the project supported RYCO’s grant-making facility as well as its core institutional strengthening.

UNDP co-funded the RYCO’s second open call with a contribution of EUR 600,000.³⁰ The call funded CSOs and/or schools to undertake activities related to peace, reconciliation and dialogue. The applicants were mandated to have at least one partner from a RYCO contracting party different from their own. Organisations funded through this call were mostly Civil Society Organisations (32, out of 238 applications). 12 selected applications were from secondary schools (out of 40 applications). Thematically, most of the applications (and selected proposals) focused on intercultural dialogue and learning.

The Joint Project put in place a system of spot-checks on RYCO’s OC2 subgrantees. The purpose of on-the-spot verifications was to confirm that the RYCO financed activities and services through the grant scheme have been delivered, that expenditure declared by the beneficiaries had been paid, and that operations complied with RYCO legal and financial framework. Importantly, the spot checks also served as capacity support for RYCO staff (both in HQ and in local branch offices) on financial grant monitoring. The consultants provided training and on-the-job mentoring to RYCO staff and prepared an overview of the domestic legislation in Western Balkans applicable for financial grant monitoring in both CSOs and schools as grant beneficiaries.

Key areas of UNDP institutional support to RYCO were identified through a micro-assessment (discussed in Section 4) and capacity-building plan. These included monitoring & evaluation (M&E); risk assessment and management; human resources; and health & safety. UNDP directly funded the salaries of eleven RYCO staff (5 part-time and 6 full-time) in HQ and LBOs.

Output 4 - “Opportunities for youth from diverse backgrounds to identify common peace and security priorities and enter in constructive dialogue with their peers across divides will be created, confidence in and dialogue with decision-makers will be enhanced, and youth capacities to become actors for change will be strengthened” - led by the UNDP Istanbul Regional Hub for Europe and Central Asia, along with UNDP Albania and the UNFPA Regional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia.³¹

Under this output, the project carried out an extensive research process aimed at providing an evidence base on youth perspectives on peace and security. The process itself aimed at including young people at every stage – from the design of research questions to research dissemination and advocacy.

A group of 23 young people across the Western Balkans was selected in January 2020 through an open call for applications, to co-design the research and co-lead in following advocacy efforts and dialogues. Two international research experts were recruited to help design the research methodology and facilitate training on peacebuilding, conflict analysis, dealing with

³⁰ The total amount of all OC2 projects is EUR 859,032 of which 20% should be covered by grant beneficiaries themselves. Thus, the amount that RYCO and UNDP share to pay is EUR 721, 653.7. Of this last amount, UNDP would reimburse RYCO up to EUR 600,000.

³¹ The idea of a youth-led research was initially elaborated by the Istanbul Regional Hub independently; however, it was subsequently decided that the research was ‘a good fit’ for the already existing project.

past, gender equality and gender-sensitive peacebuilding and advocacy.³² The group received training and mentoring on behavioural insights in peacebuilding, with a twofold aim: to build the overall capacity of the youth advisory group members in designing effective, behaviourally informed peacebuilding initiatives, and to give concrete guidance and support to the youth's own initiatives.

A *regional quantitative survey* of youth in the region was carried out, involving a comprehensive and statistically representative sample of 5400 young people aged 15-29 in the region. Attention was given to gender balance and representation of ethnic minorities (such as Roma youth). 20% of the sample comprised of young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), considered a proxy for the inclusion of hard-to-reach and marginalised youth. 40% of the sample reported living in households with a modest or poor economic situation.

The methodology also had a qualitative element, with 12 *focus group discussions* taking place in April 2021. The organisation and composition of the focus groups varied – for example, in Albania and Serbia women-only and male-only discussions were organised, while in Kosovo, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina the distinction was along ethnic identity, and in Montenegro there was no distinction.

Following data collection and an initial analysis of the datasets, six *data analysis validation workshops* were organised, one in each of the Western Balkans, in March 2021.³³

The report was disseminated through a dedicated website (<https://shared-futures.com/>), in English as well as the six national languages. The website includes several communication outputs, including videos, quotes and infographics to promote youth visibility and their voices.³⁴

An online regional dialogue was organised 18-19 May 2021 to launch the study. Over two days, the dialogue brought together over 170 participants from the UN, RYCO, youth organisations, civil society and academia to discuss the study results. This was intended as a first step in a wider dialogue to promote youth opinions in dialogues about peace and reconciliation.

Output 4 also offered for the youth advisory group an opportunity to submit piloting ideas for small initiatives that they would lead on. The youth were asked to form pairs or small groups and work together on the design of the initiatives, which they developed further during the behavioural insights training and mentoring. In the end, three teams submitted proposals and were funded, focusing on environmental protection and training on non-violent communication (Bosnia and Herzegovina); storytelling as an advocacy tool (Albania); and raising awareness on sexual harassment (Montenegro).

³² The first envisaged training and face to face consultation workshop, originally scheduled for March 2020, was cancelled due to the Covid-19 outbreak, and was substituted with a series of 7 online consultations, of 2-2.5 hours each, during March-May 2020.

³³ These were organised as in-person meetings following Covid-19 precautions, with a maximum of 10 participants in each including the youth advisory group members as well as UNDP, UNFPA and RYCO representatives.

³⁴ A social media campaign was also carried out, along with a press briefing to promote the findings of the report. Over 3000 copies of the reports are to be printed soon in English and disseminated through UN and RYCO with stakeholders.

In its original formulation, Output 4 also aimed at connecting youth directly with decision-makers, civil society, media and other actors through dialogue events taking place at national level. The Covid-19 pandemic affected this component, as convening people face-to-face was no longer possible. The Regional Youth Peace Lab (initially referred to as ‘Hackathon’) was devised partly as way to respond to the limitations posed by the pandemic. This was a mentored process where teams of young policymakers competed in defining and developing concrete, actionable policy solutions.³⁵

Joint Project’s Theory of Change

At the design stage, the Theory of Change of the project was described as follows:

“If RYCO supports sustained dialogue and joint problem solving between different groups, and establishes mechanisms for reconciliation, then collaboration and trust between groups in Western Balkans is enhanced and social cohesion promoted, because different groups in the Western Balkans will identify common goals and realize positive change can only be achieved through collaboration and harnessing the strength of diversity”.

Through a retrospective Theory of Change exercise undertaken as part of this evaluation, two key pathways to impact were identified for the project. **The first pathway involved strengthening RYCO’s ability to function effectively in its mission.** This was to be achieved by supporting RYCO to put in place strong internal *systems and procedures* (mostly through Output 3); access to *networks* of peace actors that can serve as partners (mostly through Outputs 1 and 2); *tools and methodologies* that can be used to promote peacebuilding work (mostly through Outputs 1 and 2); and *greater knowledge and understanding* of youth perceptions and priorities around peace and social cohesion (mostly through the research in Output 4).

The second pathway involves working directly with young people and other key actors (such as teachers) to facilitate inter-group contact and greater awareness and understanding of peace-related issues. As a result of this improved engagement, it was expected that more schools, organisations and individuals will become active in peacebuilding and reconciliation, and form partnerships and collaborations that go beyond ‘inherited’ routes.

The two pathways converged in the expectation that, as a result of the project, contact among the Western Balkans would be increased – which, in turn, was anticipated to enhance intergroup trust, eventually leading to the project’s ultimate impact, i.e. enhanced social cohesion and reconciliation in the Western Balkans.

The Joint Project was firmly grounded in the *contact hypothesis*, i.e., the notion that the quality and quantity of intergroup contact reduces individuals’ unfavourable outgroup attitudes. While

³⁵ Through a competition format, young people (aged 18-30) were brought together to propose policy solutions to pressing regional issues. Mixed groups received mentoring from experts in policymaking, public advocacy, and the specific subject matter and 20 policy proposals were presented. The competition was concluded with a 48-hour voting session, where the general public was able to attend a virtual event, watch the policy pitches, and vote for their favourite ones. Teams that authored the top 3 policies for each of the challenges were rewarded with prizes including Amazon Kindles and gift cards. The best policies will be published in the Western Balkans Youth Policy Book and the Guide for Innovative Policy Making. Information about teams, mentors and proposals, as well as videos of the pitches and the closing ceremony, can be seen on the Youth Peace Lab’s interactive online platform: <https://youthpeacelab.net/>

common in many peacebuilding interventions, particularly those that involve youth, the contact hypothesis is not without its critics and caveats. Key factors stressed in the literature are the context in which the interaction takes place, the power dynamics between participants, and the attitudes that participants encounter when they go back to their respective communities.³⁶ These caveats do not invalidate the contact hypothesis, but rather point to the need to consider the *quality* of intergroup contact, and the *societal context* where initiatives take place. This point is also stressed in the *Shared Futures* report, which clearly distinguishes between mere contact, which in itself is not sufficient, and can even be deleterious, and inter-group friendship, which is an enabler of change.

*“Intergroup contact has often been used as a tool for improving intergroup trust and relations. Shared Futures found that when it comes to intergroup social relations, the **quality of intergroup relationships** not only trumps quantity; the two may possibly have different consequences. Having mere acquaintances from other communities, particularly in specific social environments characterized by segregation or other forms of discrimination, can be counter-productive in that it could in some cases facilitate more negative attitudes towards others. Opportunities for young people to meet and build friendships across ethnic, religious and geographic lines should be fostered, because they are associated with a wide range of positive outcomes.” (Shared Futures, 2021: 15)*

The project embraced a positive image of young people as potential agents of change in their communities. It did not directly prioritise engagement with those young people who are involved in hate speech and hate crimes in the sub-region. Instead, it sought to nurture and amplify peaceful voices and create an enabling environment where such ‘engines for peace’ can be built upon. At the same time, the project explicitly recognised that young people are not a homogenous group, and that the experience of individual young men and women is determined by intersectional identities (gender, class, economic circumstances, ethnic and linguistic identities, sexual orientation, among others) rather than simply by ‘being young’. The project itself is rooted in RYCO’s effort to reach out to young people beyond the ‘usual suspects’, i.e., urban, educated, well-connected youth.

Key to the project strategy was working with groups of self-selected individuals, who already have a strong interest and motivation to be part of such activities- specifically the teachers excellence pool (Output 1); the Y-Peer trainers (Output 2), the Youth Advisory Group (Output 4) and the Regional Youth Lab participants (Output 4). While there were differences among the outputs, a common approach was to support these participants through training, mentoring, and opportunities for quality interaction with people from other groups. The expectation (which represented a key assumption of the project’s Theory of Change) was that a **positive catalytic effect would be unleashed, with benefits gradually spreading beyond these selected groups.** During our consultations, this process has been variedly referred by participants as a ‘snowballing effect’ or ‘cascading effect’, while a Y-PEER trainer has vividly compared it to a game of tag, where players who have been ‘tagged’ go on to ‘tag’ others in turn. Output 2 provides the clearest example of this process, as an initial group of 18 YPEER ToT participants went on to organise local workshops (supported by the project and reaching approximately 300 participants), and, from there, ‘best innovative ideas’ were funded reaching approximately 600 young people.

³⁶ Some critics suggest that interventions based on contact theory can actually perpetuate negative experiences. increase prejudices between ingroups and outgroups, and/or undermine the social justice demands of the group in a lesser-power position (Paolini et al., 2010; McKeown & Dixon, 2012).

Gender is considered in the Theory of Change at the level of outputs ('sphere of control'), where attention is given to gender equity in selection of participants, organisation of activities and development of methodologies. At the level of outcomes ('sphere of influence') the project is aimed at promoting awareness of gender equality, as well as to challenge sexist, homophobic and transphobic perceptions and beliefs. At the level of impact ('sphere of influence'), the project aims to improve to gender equality in the Western Balkans. The degree to which these expectations have been realised is discussed in Section 4.

5. Key Findings

This section outlines the key findings of the evaluation across the five evaluation questions. In summary, the evaluation found that the joint project was **highly relevant** to the regional context of the Western Balkans and to each of the national contexts. The project was **coherent** with governments' and civil society's priorities; it filled a clear programming gap and did not duplicate existing initiatives. However, synergies with other existing initiatives in the sub-region were very limited. The project was implemented **efficiently**, and **objectives were mostly achieved** despite the challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The project had a direct **impact** on RYCO's institutional strengthening as well as a catalytic impact in facilitating support by other development partners. The project also shows initial signs of impact in engaging teachers and young people; however, the progress and sustainability of these initial changes will depend on further engagement and support. The project strived to be **gender-sensitive** in its choice of participants, methodologies and activities; however, the evaluation could not find evidence of the project positively influencing gender equality in the region.

EQ1: Did the joint project respond to key peacebuilding priorities in the Western Balkans?

The project was highly relevant to the region, and was aligned with national priorities of Western Balkans governments. This relevance was primarily linked to the support for RYCO, a unique regional institution with widely recognised potential for peacebuilding in the region by virtue of its inter-governmental nature. By supporting RYCO, the project directly contributed to advancing **regional cooperation**, which is a stated priority of all Western Balkans governments and closely linked to the process of EU accession.

A review of the United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks (UNDAFs)/ United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks³⁷ that were current at the time of project design shows great variation in the emphasis given to peace and security issues. Bosnia and Herzegovina is the only place where the UNDAF (covering the period 2015-2020) had a specific focus area on rule of law and human security, and a specific output on peace and reconciliation ("*By 2019, BiH consolidates and strengthens mechanisms for peaceful resolutions of conflicts, reconciliation, respect for diversity, and community security*"), which is a clear fit for RYCO. While not mentioning peace and conflict, other UNDAFs and UN cooperation frameworks include objectives of social inclusion and rights of vulnerable groups, which are all closely aligned with RYCO's mission and the objectives of the project. Youth empowerment is a strategic priority for Western Balkans governments, as shown by dedicated youth laws, policies, and structures (Jovanov & Stankovski, 2020).

The project had a broad conceptualisation of peace - in line with the notion of 'positive peace' - and as such it was relevant to all national contexts. It directly addressed dynamics of polarisation, lack of contact and prejudice towards 'the other', which are present across the Western Balkans, albeit with different manifestations. Several informants have noted that the project was very timely, taking place at a moment when the political atmosphere in the sub-region appeared to be worsening.³⁸

³⁷ The United National Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) is now renamed the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (Cooperation Framework) to more accurately reflect the relationship and collaboration between governments and the UN development system to achieve the SDGs. <https://sdg.iisd.org/news/un-publishes-guidance-on-revamped-undaf/>

³⁸ Interview with Dion van den Berg and Simone Remijnse (PAX), June 24th, 2021.

*“After the establishment of RYCO in 2017, the political atmosphere in the region became more tense, with a rapid downgrade of political narratives. This impacted not only our work at RYCO, but the very idea of regional cooperation” (Fatos Mustafa, former RYCO Deputy Secretary General).*³⁹

The project had a positive rationale for engaging youth, recognising the important and positive contribution that young people make as actors of peace, justice and reconciliation, in line with UNSCR 2250. The project also recognised, and sought to address, the challenge of reaching out to young people from all walks of life - including both young women and young men, young people from disadvantaged background and marginalised groups. While the design phase did not include a formal conflict analysis or dedicated consultations with young people, it built on the joint knowledge and expertise of the participating UN agencies and RYCO.

The project originated from a joint UN/ RYCO idea, with RYCO leading in the identification of priority areas of support. It started at a time when RYCO did not yet have a strategic plan, and the identification of needs was largely based on the lessons emerging from the first open call. The project’s design phase largely overlapped with the consultative process for designing the RYCO Strategic Plan 2019-2021.⁴⁰ Local Branch Offices were consulted in project design; however, they had limited capacity and time to be substantially involved.⁴¹

*“The project responded 120% to our needs. [...] The region is very fragile and needs these kinds of projects” (Djuro Blanuša, former RYCO Secretary General).*⁴²

Our interviews achieved limited insight into the involvement of Country Offices in project design. Participants at Country Office level for UNDP and UNFPA were identified as the key focal points for the project, yet were largely unable to comment on the design phase. They were either not yet in their current role at the time, or explicitly remarked that the involvement of Country Offices in the design phase had been low. Involvement of heads of agency in discussions in the design phase was mentioned in some cases, and the involvement of the former UNFPA regional director was noted specifically.⁴³

The evaluation did not find instances in which the project duplicated existing initiatives – but neither did it find examples of commonality or synergy with other initiatives. Two other PBF projects were implemented in the Western Balkans during the timeframe of the joint project, namely the *Dialogues For the Future* (a joint project of UNDP, UNICEF and UNESCO to promote dialogue and social cohesion in and between Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia)⁴⁴ and the project *Empowering Youth for a Peaceful, Prosperous, and*

³⁹ Interview with Fatos Mustafa, June 11th, 2021.

⁴⁰ A regional Strategic Conference for drafting RYCO Strategic Plan took place in March 2018 and was followed by national consultations.

⁴¹ It was reported that a 10-day joint workshop was organised at the beginning of the project in designing the activities, approach and workplan for all four components of the project.

⁴² Interview with Fatos Mustafa, June 11th, 2021.

⁴³ For Output 4, heads of agency were engaged by UNDP IRH at the design stage to ensure that a focal point would be nominated for the process. Focal points were involved in providing feedback.

⁴⁴ Dialogue for the Futures (DFF) was implemented from 2019 to 2021 following up from a previous project of the same name in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was funded by the PBF through the IRF for a total of USD 4,183,992.51 and included the organisation of participatory dialogue events as well as a small grants facility. See https://www.ba.undp.org/content/bosnia_and_herzegovina/en/home/democratic-governance-and-peacebuilding/DFFRegional.html.

Sustainable Future in Kosovo, which brought together UNICEF, UNDP and UN Women.⁴⁵ In the design phase of the projects, there was some joint reflection and exchange in particular around indicators, and a meeting of the project managers was organised in Podgorica. During implementation, the three UNDP project managers were in regular contact and exchanged information.⁴⁶ This positive collaboration notwithstanding, it appears that the three projects ran largely in parallel, and we could not find examples of substantive cross-fertilisation. We understand that this is partly due to Covid-related challenges, which both eliminated the possibility of travelling and significantly increased the workload for each project team to deliver its own objectives.

The Joint Project remained relevant during implementation, in spite of the significant challenges related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The project rationale and *ethos* were enormously affected by the pandemic, as the envisaged pathways to impact of the project greatly relied on bringing people from different parts of the Western Balkans together in person. Like most peacebuilding projects around the world, the joint project adapted its activities through an ‘online switch’. This approach inevitably created many challenges, at times resulting in ‘screen fatigue’ and lower participant satisfaction that would probably not have been the case otherwise. Importantly, the online format also reduced the outreach of the project, making IT connectivity and skills an essential condition for participation. Yet interviews with project participants consistently showed that the relevance of the project was not invalidated: participants still felt that their participation had been worthwhile, although under constraining circumstances. The ways in which the project has adapted to the new reality are discussed in more detail under EQ2.

‘Do no harm’ considerations were taken into account in design and implementation, albeit not systematically. The majority of risks listed in the project document referred to the possibility of the context negatively impacting the project (e.g., the intergovernmental nature of RYCO’s governing board posing challenges in implementation; or *force majeure*/ acts of nature) rather than the project having unintended negative impacts on the context. Only one instance of the latter scenario was contemplated (“*Intercultural dialogue activities supported through the project touch on potentially sensitive topics and disestablish the participation of targeted groups*”), with the mitigation strategy being the support of intercultural dialogue as a process “whilst maintaining a clear neutral stance on the contents”.

Throughout implementation, the team were conscious of the potential risk of the project reaching only the ‘usual suspects’ and thus unintentionally reinforcing existing inequalities. The project was designed to address this risk through clear selection criteria that sought to include young people from varied backgrounds. Above all, the notion of multiple layers of engagement (described as ‘snowballing’) was meant to address the challenge of wider outreach. A strong emphasis on sound and replicable methodologies directly supporting this snowballing effect avoided the risks that may derive from participants engaging in facilitating peacebuilding activities without the necessary skills.

The selection process of RYCO grants also considers the risk of doing harm, particularly for grants dealing with highly sensitive topics. Particular attention is given to ensuring that

⁴⁵ The project ran from 2018 to 2021 and was funded by the PBF/IRF for a total of USD 2,772,780. It aimed to provide a space for youth from all backgrounds in the selected localities in Kosovo to work together to address shared challenges and become more active changemakers and catalyse peacebuilding efforts in Kosovo.

⁴⁶ The managers of the other two projects participated in the research inception workshop in Budva (Montenegro), in October 2019, and were consulted throughout the research process. The three projects came together to share reflections and learning during the *Western Balkan regional workshop to develop PBF eligibility request* (Tirana, 3-4 February 2020). The eligibility request was submitted in January 2021.

grantees have the necessary experience, skills and support to tackle these issues in a way that does not unintentionally result in negative impact.

EQ2: Was the project well managed?

The timeframe was very compressed for such an ambitious and complex project, even after the extensions. The challenge of ‘not having enough time’ came out at every level and areas of the project. Despite time pressure, **each of the four outputs performed well against its original workplan**. The project impressively managed to implement most of its planned activities, if at the cost of a very high workload, and low work-life balance, for staff in the UN agencies and RYCO.

The most significant delays were experienced around the co-funding of RYCO’s second open call, as part of Output 3. Predating the Covid-19 pandemic, these issues relate to the requirement for RYCO to undergo a micro-assessment, aimed at determining its level of risk as an implementing partner, in accordance with the UN Harmonised Approach to Cash Transfers (HACT) Framework. This was in turn triggered by the addition of Output 4, and related costed extension, which brought the overall budget above the threshold for which such a micro-assessment was required.

The micro-assessment, carried out by KPMG International, found that RYCO posed a ‘moderate’ risk as an implementing partner, due to several factors (inadequate or missing policies and procedures in several areas; Local Branch Offices not registered as separate legal entities; functioning of the governing board and related inter-governmental tensions). Consequently, UNDP contribution to the RYCO grants could not be transferred upfront, but rather had to be covered by RYCO and then reimbursed by UNDP following the submission of relevant documentation.

In order to progress with implementation, RYCO had in the meantime launched of the second Open Call before the signing of its Project Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the UN. At the time when the results of the micro-assessment were made known, the selection process for the grants had already been completed and successful applicants had been informed of the outcome. The delay in funding and related uncertainties created significant challenges for selected grantees - particularly schools and smaller organisations - and negatively affected the perception of RYCO as a friendly donor as well as grantees’ ability to focus on the peacebuilding ambitions of their projects.⁴⁷

Four grants were financed directly by RYCO as their implementation was time-sensitive. The PCA between UNDP and RYCO was finally signed in September 2019, an alternative source of funding was secured for the funding of grants (to be then reimbursed by UNDP), and grant implementation started shortly thereafter.

The three UN agencies in Albania (HQ of the project) collaborated positively and constructively, with regular contact and open exchange of information among the UNDP project manager and the key project focal points for UNICEF and UNFPA. For Output 4, collaboration between UNDP and UNFPA in Albania and the UNDP Istanbul Regional Hub and UNFPA Regional Office also worked well (UNICEF was not involved in Output 4).

Each of the four outputs was contextually relevant and had clear internal logic; however, outputs were largely self-contained in design and implementation, resulting in limited cross-fertilisation. The outputs, led by different UN partners, represent the primary organising structure of the project (as stated in the project document, “[t]he expected outcome will be

⁴⁷ Interview with Deborah Reynolds and Mario Mazic (PeaceNexus), June 25th, 2021.

achieved through the implementation of diverse activities along three main outputs” – PBF, 2018: 13-14). The four project outputs were designed with separate workplans and set of activities, and as a result, they were implemented largely in parallel, with limited points of contact. Very few among project partners could comment about the project as a whole or give examples of synergy among different components. Most interviewees at the national level could only comment on the specific component they have been involved with, and the different outputs were at times described as “four different projects”.⁴⁸

Two significant examples of cross-fertilisation that have emerged during the evaluation include:

- Inclusion of the *Shared Futures* report as a data source in the RYCO monitoring and evaluation framework (which was developed with UNDP support). Some survey questions were designed to feed into the framework. RYCO plans on using the Shared Futures report findings as a baseline, and replicating the survey periodically, using the same methodology.
- Adoption of a common approach for the teachers’ toolkit (produced as part of Output 1) and the Y-PEER manual (produced as part of Output 2). The two tools were authored by the same consultant and share a common theoretical framework and approach— thus giving the teachers and Y-PEER facilitators a shared language for future collaboration.

Collaboration between the RYCO Headquarters office and UN agencies in Albania was generally positive, with some challenges mostly due to competing bureaucratic requirements and timelines. The project brought together two institutions (the UN and RYCO) which both had very demanding bureaucracies. There was, at times, a mutual perception that unrealistic demands and expectations ‘on the other side’ failed to take into consideration the complexity of each organisation’s systems, procedures and decision-making structures.

The delay related to micro-assessment of RYCO as an implementing partner was arguably the most significant challenge in the UN-RYCO collaboration,⁴⁹ and it indicates a fundamental and unresolved tension in project design. The premise of the project was that RYCO, as a relatively new institution, needed institutional strengthening to fulfil its mission; yet at the same time, as the implementing partner RYCO was expected to already possess the necessary systems and procedures already in place at the outset of implementation.

As an intergovernmental organisation, RYCO was an unusual implementing partner for a UN project – a challenge compounded by the fact that RYCO was in its early days, with a somewhat unclear division of decision-making responsibility between the governing board and the secretariat. This risk was mentioned in the project document (“*Complex intergovernmental nature of RYCO’s governing board might pose challenges in implementation of certain activities*” – PBF, 2018) but the likelihoods of occurrence was determined “low”. Mitigation strategies were: the governing board being informed of the project and indicating support; and the UNFPA representative in Albania sitting on RYCO’s Advisory Board. In contrast, the micro-assessment considered the Governing Body to be one of the areas posing “moderate to significant” risk (KPMG, 2019: 4).⁵⁰ In practice, political tensions and stalemates within the

⁴⁸ A partial exception is the design of the Youth Perception Study where both UNDP and UNFPA Country Offices were involved in the definition of methodology and tools for the research and in the selection of the Youth Advisory Group. UNICEF did not participate in Output 4.

⁴⁹ Interview with Djuro Blanus, June 10th, 2021.

⁵⁰ An example highlighted in the micro-assessment was the stalemate following the decision of Serbia to remove its youth representative in the RYCO Board, who had intended to participate in a meeting in the Kosovo* Parliament in March 2019. The youth representatives in the governing board expressed their support for their dismissed colleague in a joint statement (<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/03/18/removal-serbias-ryco-board-member-bad-message-regional-cooperation/>).

RYCO governing board have posed greater challenges than anticipated at the project design stage.

Overall, the degree of engagement and ownership of the project by Country Offices other than Albania was low, although with differences among partner agencies. UNDP, UNFPA and UNICEF adopted distinctively different approaches to the involvement of Country Offices in the Western Balkans. In particular, UNFPA Country Offices were the only ones that received funding for implementation. They also reported the highest level of involvement in project implementation and direct engagement with project participants (for Outputs 2 and 4). Specifically, UNFPA Country Offices reported close involvement in developing the Y-PEER manual; identifying young people who were interested in becoming Y-PEER trainers; supporting local workshops. This was done in close cooperation with UNFPA Albania, UNFPA Regional Office, as well as the RYCO LBOs, and collaboration was reported as positive on all fronts.

UNDP Country Offices did not receive funding and were involved in what appears to be mostly a supporting role, such as recruitment of consultants/evaluators, procurement, or other operational aspects. A more substantive engagement was reported with respect to the research in Output 4, where UNDP Country Offices were consulted in creating the research framework methodology and tools, supported the Youth Advisory Group and helped organising research validation sessions. UNDP Country Offices expressed satisfaction with the level of communication and sharing of information from UNDP Albania. Collaboration between UNDP Country Offices and RYCO Local Branch Offices was generally positive, while there appears to have been limited interaction between UNDP and UNFPA Country Offices on the project.

UNICEF worked through RYCO Local Branch Offices rather than UNICEF Country Offices; the latter were kept in the loop regarding implementation and were involved in discussion on methodology.

RYCO Local Branch Offices played an important role in the implementation of the project. In the case of Montenegro, where there is no UNFPA Office, the RYCO local branch office directly implemented the UNFPA component. Local Branch Offices worked closely with UNDP and UNFPA Country Offices on their respective components. Collaboration at the national level was positive and so was the relationship with the RYCO HQ. Local Branch Offices informants did remark, however, on the complexity of the project, and the toll that it took particularly in the very difficult circumstances of Covid-19.

The project adapted to the Covid-19 restrictions through an ‘online switch’. These solutions impacted the engagement and satisfaction of participants in some activities, as well as the outreach of the project in rural areas and among underprivileged youth groups. Yet the project appears to have made the best of a very difficult and unprecedented situation. Participants generally recognised that these online solutions, while not ideal, were the only option given the circumstances. Hybrid solutions were implemented when the national situation allowed. The effects and impact of the online switch are further discussed under EQ3 and EQ4.

RYCO’s grant-making was severely affected by Covid-19. Initially (March-April, 2020), grantees were asked to postpone implementation of international mobility activities, while national and local activities could go ahead. Then, in May and June, as the situation was not improving, grants were suspended. Implementation resumed in the summer, and grantees were asked to revise their projects to switch to online mode. Out of 44 projects, five were cancelled

during the implementation (1 from Kosovo, 2 from North Macedonia and 2 from Serbia). One of the projects did not implement its activities, having thus in total 38 projects (86.36%) implementing their activities under OC2.

While the success rate was very high given the circumstances, there was a general sense among the grantees that having to comply with the very demanding requirements of the grants came at a high cost, particularly given the difficult personal circumstances that many people were facing at the time. Participants from RYCO and UNDP regretted having to chase grantees for paperwork, or push them to meet deadlines, when they were suffering from Covid and/or mourning the loss of loved ones. These instances show the pressure put on all parties (project team and grantees alike) not only to adjust to the new reality, but also to implement everything on time while they were struggling to maintain their physical and mental health. The diffuse perception among grantees was that administrative and reporting requirements were too demanding and is further explored below under EQ3.

EQ3: Was the joint project successful in delivering on its intended objectives?

The project delivered effectively on its intended objectives, in each of the four outputs. These results can be neatly mapped against the key steps identified (retrospectively) in the Theory of Change.

The project achieved its objectives in terms of institutional strengthening of RYCO, which has now established procedures in the areas of monitoring and evaluation, risk assessment and management, human resources, health and safety. Regarding the contribution to RYCO grant-making, in spite of the delays due to the micro-assessment (described in EQ2 above), the majority of grants were completed – a significant achievement given the circumstances.

The grants helped consolidate existing cross-border partnerships as well as establishing new ones. The online survey showed that most partners (19 out of 31 responses⁵¹) had not collaborated before; in 10 cases, it was a mix (some partners and collaborated before, and some had not); and only in two cases all partners had already worked together.

Grants worked in key areas relevant to peace and social inclusion – some examples are given in Box 2.

Examples of grants funded under RYCO's second open call

BALKON - Balkan Connection Through Music was a project connecting youth from **Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia** through music and theatre. The aim of the project was to help youth organisations develop and diversify their activities for youth, especially for girls and young people with autism. The three partner organisations shared different methods of engaging and encouraging youth for change. The activities not only addressed specific challenges of young people but also boosted intercultural regional cooperation and reconciliation. Project activities guided the participants through meeting one another, working with each other on the same goal (song, melody, lyrics), and then sharing the joy of that hard work and celebrating their friendships through video presentations. Some of the activities were *girls-only rock music workshops* and *theatre workshops for youth with autism*. 40 young people participated in the project - 32 females and 8 males. Nine participants had autism.

⁵¹ One respondent skipped this question.

Project implemented by Udruženje “akustikUm” - Muzička omladina JMBH from Tuzla (Bosnia and Herzegovina) in partnership with organisations UG Nebograd and Organizacija za promociju aktivizma OPA(Femix) from Belgrade (Serbia).

Opening Doors for Roma Youth was a project led by the Serbian Roma Youth Association (SRYA), which aimed to strengthen participation of Roma youth in regional policy making. The project brought together Roma youth from all the Western Balkans. It consisted of six days’ training that took place in Novi Sad, Serbia and an action planning process that was conducted online after the training. The training gathered socially active Roma youth from WB on the topics of Roma history and regional cooperation. At the end of the training, mentorship support was provided for all participants. An action plan for this newly established network of Roma activists was created based on findings during the training and consultative process with mentoring held afterwards. 30 participants were young women and 28 were young men.

Project implemented by the Serbian Roma Youth Association (SRYA) in partnership with Association MIR Skopje, Institute of Romani Culture in Albania - IRCA and NGO Roma Youth Initiative “Be My Friend” Visoko BIH.

“A Youth Perspective to Remembering the Past in the Western Balkans” focused on promoting understanding and trust by empowering young people in the region to explore issues of remembrance of their common past. Young people from **Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia** learned about each other’s remembrance traditions and developed their critical thinking and public speaking skills. One of the key project outputs is the virtual exhibition titled **“Once upon a time and never again”**, which honours the 1133 children who died in the war in Kosovo during the period from 1998 to 2000. It contains about 40 items that family members keep in memory of their children. The exhibition aims to raise awareness of the war and its consequences, and to recall the importance of dealing with the past, promoting peace and dialogue in the region. Initially opened in May 2019 in Kosovo, the exhibition was planned to take place also in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. Due to restrictions posed by the COVID-19 pandemic the project team developed a virtual exhibition.⁵²

Project implemented by the Humanitarian Law Centre Kosovo in partnership with Humanitarian Law Centre Serbia and Association Transitional Justice, Accountability and Remembrance in Bosnia and Herzegovina.*

Box 2– Examples of grants funded under RYCO OC2.

Grantees appreciated the funding opportunity and related support provided by RYCO. However, **the evaluation found that the level of grantees’ satisfaction with the administrative dimension of the grant scheme was low for the second Open Call.** Administration, paperwork, and financial reporting requirements were considered disproportionately burdensome for the nature of grantees and the size of the grants. In particular:

- Administrative and reporting requirements were considered “far too complicated and time-consuming” by almost all survey respondents (26 out of 27).
- Views about support received from RYCO in implementation varied, with most (17) respondents declaring that they had received all the support they needed, 11 stating that

⁵² <https://www.rycowb.org/?p=8990>

they had received “some support”, and four saying that they had received “little or no support”.

- Burdensome administrative requirements were considered second only to Covid-19 in the list of challenges experienced.

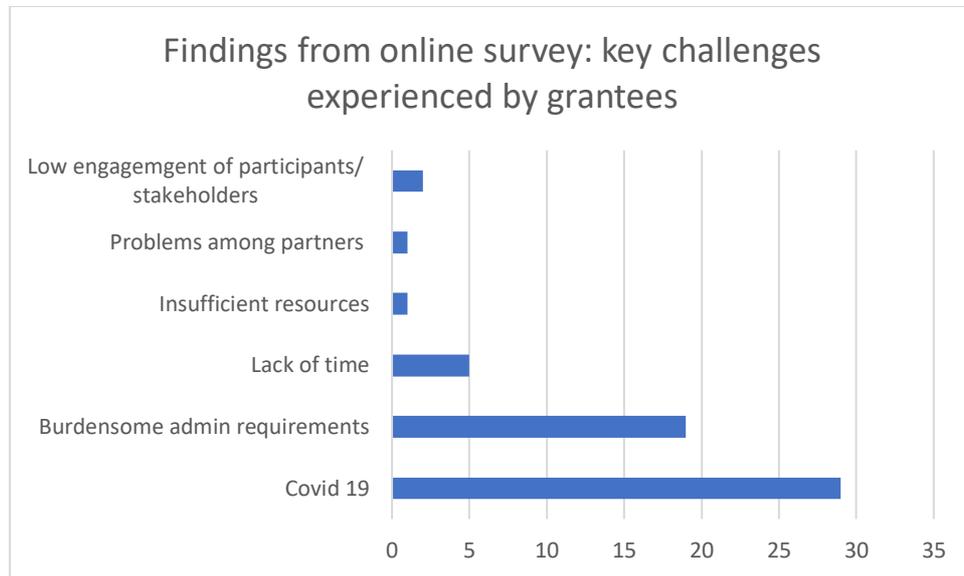


Figure 1– Feedback from online survey (n=32).

All respondents from schools (8) considered the administrative and financial requirements “far too complicated / time consuming”.

Despite these challenges most respondents (27 out of 32) stated that their project had reached all its objectives. Besides frustration related to finance and administration, **grantees expressed great appreciation for RYCO as an institution**, and praised in particular the Local Branch Offices for their commitment, support and positive attitude. Most respondents (18) agreed with the statement that “RYCO is successful in achieving its mission of youth cooperation and reconciliation in the Western Balkans”.

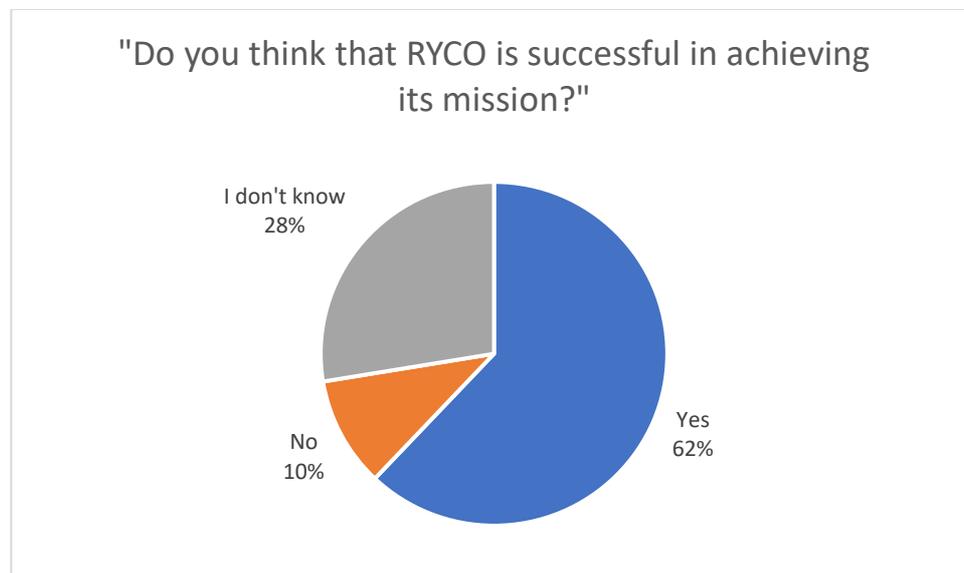


Figure 2– OC2 grantees’ views on RYCO’s success in achieving its mission (n=32)

OC2 grantees in their own words

“Great idea for involving young people in current topics and situations, but overcomplicated and exhausting documentation”

“The idea of RYCO is excellent but the structural part of it is long away from the goal”

“RYCO should focus more on the output of projects, stories which emerge [...] rather than administration and procedures. In the end, the feeling our partnership got was that it did not matter at all what we have done, all that mattered was if paperwork and bills were fine”

“Financial reporting procedures are complicated and take a lot of time and energy, should be facilitated and made more practical [...]. Please make sure that the financial evaluation does not prevail over that of the impact and quality of the projects. [It seems] like everything is about finance and we forget about what the project was about and what impact it gave. By this I do not mean the avoidance of financial procedures, but they should not dominate [to the extent] that everything seems to be about the project finances, and not the project itself.”

“Administrative responsibilities can be reduced, and the final report simplified. In terms of mission, keep up the good work”

“Projects must be more long-term and sustainable if we want to see good quality and substantial impact. Peace cannot be ‘planted’ with periodic projects, but continuity is needed, without interruption”

“Keep it up, with the positivity that characterizes you: the Western Balkans youth need YOU! :)”

Box 3– Feedback shared by grantees in the online survey

The project achieved its stated objectives with regard to peacebuilding education in schools. Through Output 1, the project helped RYCO and the UN partners get better knowledge and understanding of the regional and national context of peace education initiatives in the region. On this basis the toolkit was developed, providing RYCO and other actors with a sound and replicable methodology. The engagement of teachers was valuable at various levels: it allowed the project to ‘test’ and validate the methodology; it provided an opportunity for teachers from around the region to get together and share views, finding motivation and energy from contact with like-minded educators; and it led to the development of lesson plans and tools that will be shared on the online portal for the use of teachers in the region as well as elsewhere in the world.

Participants’ satisfaction was high: all consulted teachers (19) expressed appreciation of the project. Teachers particularly praised the continued support received over time by the same expert consultant, who had extensive knowledge and experience of education in the region and provided thoughtful facilitation of the process. They enjoyed connecting with each other and learning about new methods. In the interviews, teachers expressed great expectations about the potential of the toolkit and its integration in school curricula and were keen to receive translated copies to share with their colleagues.

Teacher participants in their own words

“The program made me feel prepared to stand in front of students and discuss with them issues related to identity, tolerance, different cultures or different groups”

“The online training was very hard because of other jobs but the team kept me going”

“In the education system, [those of us who] deal with these things often feel like lonely lunatics, they look at us strangely, why do we do it, what does it lead to... Very often they think that they pay us a lot for this. [...] Then when you meet about 15 other people who are also thinking [the same], you realise that you are not alone, you are not the only one and you are not crazy”.

Box 4 – quotes from teacher participants

The project adapted the Y-PEER methodology to peacebuilding, training a group of Y-PEER facilitators as a first step towards strengthening the capacity of youth actors and organisations to be actively engaged in peacebuilding. The training manual was produced to offer a skills-based curriculum for peer education trainers in the areas of intercultural dialogue, peacebuilding and conflict transformation, giving particular attention to the needs of vulnerable, marginalised and hard-to-reach youth and promoting a gender perspective. The group of Y-PEER trainers was set up to serve as a facilitation resource pool for RYCO, UN and others. Under this output, the project accompanied the young facilitators in organising local workshops (reaching approximately 300 young people); 15 of the best innovative ideas that came out of the workshop were subsequently funded (reaching approximately 600 young people). Several of the best innovative ideas used visual arts (photography, drawing, painting, music, theatre), as shown by the examples in Box 5.

Examples of ‘Best Innovative Ideas’ funded under Output 2

Peace4Mels - Peacebuilding art is an innovative idea in peacebuilding and conflict resolution in **North Macedonia** which, under the slogan “What is peace for me?” aimed at broadening the peace perspective and confronting the stereotypes among youth by inspiring their inner artist to create photographs and drawings. The idea was to channel creativity and use it to bridge the gap with “the other”. The initiative has reached more than 500 high school students across the country and resulted in 156 individual works being submitted in both art competition categories. Six winners were selected.

Lost Innocence was a ‘best innovative idea’ in **Albania** which aimed at providing basic information on peace and the role of young people, gender-based violence, peer education and human trafficking; and encouraging participants to express the information and skills acquired through painting. The initiative targeted young people from Tirana, between the ages of 15-19, especially young people from marginalized groups and young people with limited opportunities. All the paintings submitted by the youth addressed issues related to peacebuilding at the local, national, and regional levels. Out of 20 paintings, 10 addressed gender-based violence and violence against women. Most participants were girls (70% vs. 30% boys), as the number of applications from boys was low. Of the three winners, one was a boy.

The play **'Okovane' ('Chained')** in **Serbia** was a theatre production about women victims of violence, based on true witness accounts. Domestic violence is prevalent in Serbia, and patriarchal norms make it shameful for women to talk about it or seek help, particularly in rural communities. 'Chained' was the realisation of an idea that emerged in the workshop 'With and about conflicts', which aimed to explore peacebuilding in local communities. A tour of the country is planned as a follow-up, in partnership with different institutions and participating in various theatre festivals. By performing on the public stage the hope is to raise awareness among a wider audience.

"Sa seksizmom na Ti" (lit. 'with sexism on a first name basis') was an innovative idea implemented in **Serbia** to raise awareness of sexism among high school students. Young people witness sexist behaviour every day – in their family, on the street and in the media; the project output was a theatrical play, and educational workshops in which 40 high school students participated. The play showed how sexism manifests over time, throughout the life and development of men and women. Entering the very essence of the characters, the audience had the opportunity to understand why society does not react to this problem.

Box 5– Examples of Best Innovative Ideas (Output 2).

Participants' satisfaction in the Y-PEER training was mixed, due in large part to the different levels of experience within the group. Those participating for the first time were generally enthusiastic, while the more experienced participants expressed some disappointment in materials and methods that they saw as 'too basic'. Of the 16 participants interviewed, six expressed unreservedly positive feedback, while the remaining ten expressed some criticism around the contents of the course, seen as 'too basic' and/or 'too theoretical' (4); the quality of the trainers (2); organisational issues (3), and problems related to the online format (2).

The project achieved its objective of providing a baseline on youth perceptions around peace and reconciliation in the region, while at the same time testing a participatory research methodology.

The youth perception study was designed to serve a threefold purpose:

- *As a product*, the research addressed a recognised deficit in the evidence base on youth attitudes towards peace and conflict issues in the Western Balkans. It is expected that the findings from the study will fill a gap in the available knowledge, providing a 'baseline' upon which progress can be measured, as well as supporting the formulation of concrete recommendations for policy and programming. The study was also intended to establish a replicable methodology, to allow for follow-up studies and comparability of results.
- *As a process*, the research aimed at empowering young activists to play an active role from design to validation of results. The process was meant to function as both a *youth empowerment* measure (by galvanising youth-led peace advocacy) and a *confidence-building* measure, by bringing together like-minded young people from all the Western Balkans.
- *As a proof of concept*, the research aimed to show that doing research 'with' young people is possible, and capture learning for future similar efforts.

The Youth Advisory Group was put together to contribute to the definition of research questions and methods. Satisfaction of participants was mixed. Most appreciated the opportunity to learn about new methods and to connect with other like-minded young people across the region. Of the 16 advisors interviewed, eight gave entirely positive feedback, while others shared some criticism. The most frequent complaint concerned the online format, which seems to have dampened the enthusiasm of participants, with 'screen fatigue' increasing as

time went by. It was reported that online sessions were too long and intense; and that the group sessions were too large, limiting the possibility of meaningful collaboration (2). There was some disappointment about feedback not being incorporated (2). Methodological challenges were also present, as most advisors had no specific training on quantitative methods and thus struggled to formulate robust quantitative questions. Two participants pointed out that the questionnaire design was largely focused on inter-ethnic issues at the expense of exploring other narratives (gender, LGBTQ+, persons with disabilities).

Far from negating the value of the research as a ‘proof of concept’, these challenges represent important considerations for future involvement of young people in the research process. Issues related to the mode and timing of engagement, training and skills-building, remuneration and management of expectations are likely to emerge even more strongly if young people from different backgrounds and lower pre-existing levels of knowledge and skills are involved.

As discussed in Section 3, some of the national level advocacy activities that were initially planned as part of Output 4 could not go ahead due to the Covid-19 conditions. To mitigate these challenges, the Regional Youth Peace Lab was organised as a mentored process where teams of young participants (18-30) competed in defining and developing concrete, actionable policy solutions. The Youth Peace Lab took place in April-May 2021 using an interactive, 3D virtual platform to facilitate collaboration among young people in the Western Balkans. An example of policy proposal is presented in Box 6.

Girl Power in ICT: Educate to Excel – a policy proposal presented at the Regional Youth Peace Lab

The policy proposal “Girl Power in ICT”, presented by an all-female team of four, aimed at empowering young women to break the stigma and pursue a degree in Information and Communication Technology (ICT). It also looked to introduce experienced female professionals as role models and create platforms for young, ambitious women from the Western Balkan region to excel in a traditionally male-dominated sector.

The policy paper notes that the Western Balkans is a region characterised by a patriarchal mentality and stereotypes about gender professional roles. An impact of this is that girls perceive themselves to be less capable of succeeding in ICT studies and related professions compared to men. Recommendations include establishing a regional committee for young women in ICT, developing an online platform, and forming partnerships with the private sector.

Box 6 – Example of policy proposal with a gender focus, presented at the Regional Youth Peace Lab (Source: <https://youthpeaceclab.net/booth/team-2>).

Based on the limited number of responses received through the online survey, we note that participants’ satisfaction was high. Key benefits mentioned by participants were: learning more about policy topics (15), having a useful experience on their CV (11), expanding their professional networks (10), and receiving mentorship and feedback (10). Less frequently mentioned benefits were making new friends (7) and changing perceptions about other parts of the Western Balkans / groups (6).⁵³ Most respondents found that the online format worked reasonably well (see Figure 3).

⁵³ This was a ‘checkbox’ question in the survey, where participants were asked to select the ‘three main benefits’ from participation. Other options were improving skills as a public speaker (selected by 4); improving skills in the use of online tools and platforms (3) and fighting boredom during the Covid-19 pandemic (1). An ‘other’ open option was also available.

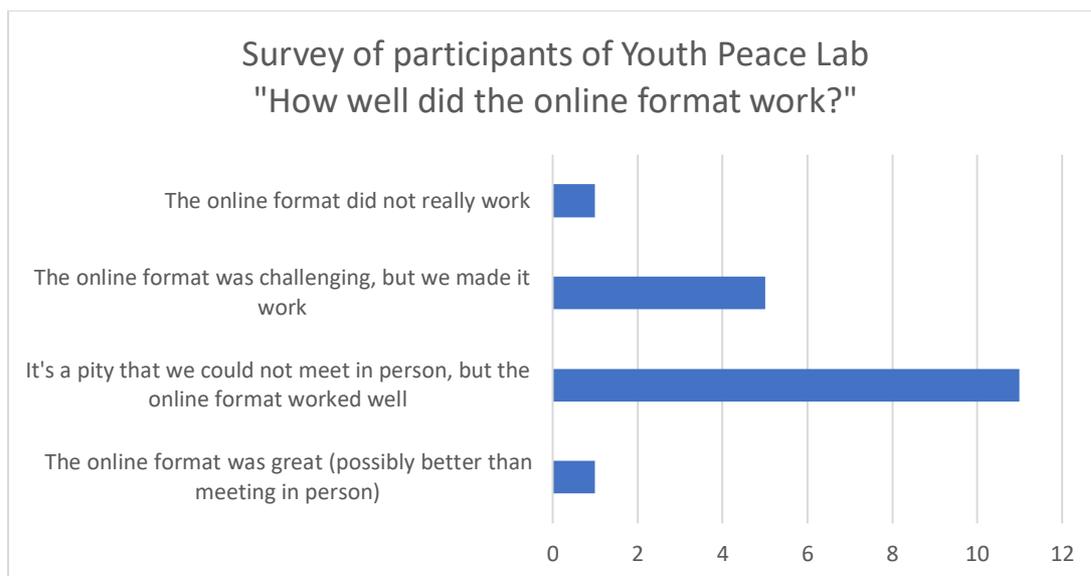


Figure 3 – Feedback of Regional Youth Peace Lab participants on the online format (n=18).

The project engaged selected groups of participants, with greater previous exposure to other groups and greater interest and motivation in peacebuilding-related issues.

In its targeting strategy, the joint project aimed at going beyond the ‘usual suspects’ and engaging hard-to-reach youth. This faced several challenges. First, regional exchanges relied on participants being fluent in English as a *lingua franca*. This requirement already excluded a significant portion of the youth population (particularly in rural areas). Second, the Covid-19 pandemic, and consequent online switch, added the requirement of a reliable internet connection, which further penalises rural youth.

Partly as a consequence of these limitations, and partly as a conscious choice, the ‘first layer’ of youth participants – who were engaged directly and over a period of time, through consultation, training and mentoring – consisted of self-identified groups who responded to an open call (Y-PEER ToT, Youth Advisory Group, and Youth Peace Lab), or were directly contacted from being already known to RYCO (as in the case of the teachers’ group). The mindset of these ‘primary’ participants was of openness and curiosity concerning other groups in the region. The expectation (crucial to the project’s Theory of Change) was that these participants would then in turn play a key role in reaching out to others. Here we briefly discuss the targeting strategy for each of the outputs.

(1) Teachers

Schools participating the project were selected by RYCO based on having held a grant in the past (or, in some cases, unsuccessfully applied for a grant). Schools were a mix of general and vocational institutions. Teachers were either selected directly by RYCO or referred by the school administration. Fluency in English was a core criterion. A conscious effort was made in this selection to include not only history and social sciences teachers – the most likely candidates for this type of activities – but also teachers of a variety of other subjects, to strengthen the point that *any* teacher can bring intercultural dialogue and peace education to the classroom. Personal motivation, interest to learn additional knowledge and skills, and desire to connect with like-minded teachers in the sub-region were the key motives for joining the project activities.

Among participating teachers, women outnumbered men 16 to 6.⁵⁴ During the evaluation, we sought to ascertain why this was the case. Some responses pointed to the fact that the teacher body is generally composed predominantly of women; however, this varies according to national context, and generally applies more to primary than to secondary education. According to research by the World Bank, the percentage of female teachers in secondary education is 60% in North Macedonia, 62% in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 66% in Serbia and 67% in Albania.⁵⁵ Thus, while women are indeed a majority in the sector, this does not fully explain the imbalance in involvement in peacebuilding activities, and this is probably a reflection of a broader trend of greater female peace activism in the Balkans, which is further discussed below under EQ5.

(2) Y-PEER trainers

The Y-PEER trainers were recruited through an open call for enthusiastic young people from the Western Balkans, aged 18 to 27. Eligibility criteria included having some previous experience in training and facilitation; an interest in peacebuilding activities and human rights activism; an open-minded attitude towards different personal identities and experiences; a commitment to staying engaged in the process; leadership spirit and creative mindset; as well as fluency in English, with other languages being considered an asset. Background or experience in working with hard-to-reach youth groups was considered an asset as well. 21 participants were selected, of which 12 identified as female, 8 identified as male, and 1 identified as ‘other’. There were just over twice as many female applicants as there were male (87 to 43 – 3 applicants identified as ‘other’).

All the Y-PEER trainers interviewed for this evaluation (16) claimed to have previous experience in activities related to peacebuilding and reconciliation - for example, in RYCO projects (2), in a USAID project (1) and as a coordinator for the Erasmus programme (1).

(3) Youth Advisory Group

The Youth Advisory Group was also recruited through an open call. Requirements included interest and experience in peacebuilding and reconciliation, with a view of gender equality in the Western Balkans region as well as inclusion of the perspectives of minority or hard-to-reach youth.⁵⁶ The gender breakdown in this case was equally split among women (12) and men (11), with a higher interest from men at the application stage (possibly because this was seen as a ‘research’ opportunity rather than a ‘peacebuilding’ activity).⁵⁷

All the advisors interviewed had previous experience in similar initiatives of youth and/or peace and reconciliation, for example initiatives by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (4), or projects by the German-Franco youth office (2).

(4) Participants in the Regional Youth Peace Lab

For the Regional Youth Peace Lab, eligibility criteria included a conversational level of English, access to a computer and a reliable internet connection. Applicants had to be able to commit to 12 days of collaboration with their team to work on the policy proposal. The criteria also stated that young people belonging to vulnerable and marginalised groups were given

⁵⁴ The breakdown was: Albania (3); Bosnia and Herzegovina (3); Montenegro (3); North Macedonia (3); Kosovo (3); Serbia (4).

⁵⁵ Data: World Bank - <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.TCHR.FE.ZS>. No data were available for Kosovo and Montenegro.

⁵⁶ The breakdown was Albania (4); Bosnia-Herzegovina (3); Kosovo (4) Montenegro (4); North Macedonia (4).

⁵⁷ One of the criteria for selection was based on their experience with the marginalised groups in their communities. 6 out of 23 selected were working for and with Roma projects. 3 of them declared to have experience with LGBTIQ+ community.

preference. 120 young people were selected to participate in the competition. Young women greatly outnumbered young men (72 vs. 38) among selected participants.

We used the online survey to gain some insights on the background and motivations of participants in the Youth Peace Lab. Out of 18 respondents (9 women and 9 men) the majority were students, living in urban areas, had already participated in activities bringing together youth from the Western Balkans, and had travelled abroad (in the Western Balkans, in Europe and elsewhere). Main reasons for travel were tourism (10), visiting friends and family (7) or participating in school exchanges (5). Most participants volunteer ‘regularly’ (6) or ‘occasionally’ (6) or have volunteered in the past (3). Interestingly, however, in spite of this exposure less than half said they had several friends in other parts of the Western Balkans (7) or in other groups in their national context (8), and the same numbers said they had only acquaintances in other parts of the Western Balkans (8) or in other groups in their national context (7) – thus reaffirming the distinction between ‘exposure’ and ‘friendship’ already discussed in Section 3.

EQ4 Are there initial indications that the joint project has led to enhanced social cohesion and reconciliation in the Western Balkans? If so, are these changes sustainable?

The complexity and ambition of the project means that impact can potentially be seen at different levels. For example:

- Impact on RYCO institutional strengthening
- Impact on participants that were directly involved in the project
- Impact beyond immediate participants (‘snowballing’ effect of the project)
- Impact on changing the discourse and narrative around peace, reconciliation and social cohesion in the region.

This section tackles each of these levels in turn, highlighting where possible the way in which different outputs contributed to each ‘type’ of impact. The time limitations of the evaluation have not allowed to systematically assess the impact derived from the RYCO grants that were co-funded through this project, beyond the self-reported impact in the online survey.

Direct impact on RYCO

Four areas of project’s direct support to RYCO have been identified in the Theory of Change: (1) *systems and procedures* (mostly through Output 3); (2) *networks of peace actors* (mostly through Outputs 1 and 2); (3) *tools and methodologies* (through all outputs); and (4) *knowledge* (mostly through the research in Output 4). Impact can be seen in all these areas.

In terms of **systems and procedures**, RYCO is a very different institution today compared to when the project started. While this transformation should not be attributed solely or straightforwardly to this project, a very clear contribution has been plainly stated by RYCO participants at all levels. As the RYCO Secretary General Albert Hani put, UNDP support on institution building supported RYCO to move from being a ‘small group of enthusiastic believers in peacebuilding and reconciliation’ to being an established institution with a much larger staff, as well as appropriate systems and procedures in place.⁵⁸

“At the beginning, RYCO was a small team, with lots of enthusiasm but little by way of experience, resources or political support. I remember working on my personal laptop out of

⁵⁸ RYCO’s SG speech at the Regional Conference for Youth and Peacebuilding (12 May 2021).

coffee shops in those early days. We were frequently told that we were too ambitious” (Fatos Mustafa, former RYCO Deputy Secretary General).⁵⁹

Yet a concern – raised during the consultations both by participants and external observers – is that **these systems and procedures pose excessively demanding requirements on the kind of actors (schools and grassroots organisations) that RYCO aims to engage in its peacebuilding mission.** In particular, the rules that were applied during the second Open Call were overly difficult and time-consuming for small organisations working on peacebuilding at local level. Going forward, it is important for RYCO to continue to seek a suitable balance between administrative and financial requirements and the flexibility and adaptability needed to work with grassroots peacebuilding actors in the Western Balkans.⁶⁰

Regarding **networks**, the project has created pools of activists (the teachers’ group, the Y-PEER trainers, Youth Advisory Group) that can be called up by RYCO for future activities. This network-building has gone alongside the development of **tools and methodologies** (particularly the teachers’ training kit, the Y-PEER manual, and the methodology developed as part of the youth perception study) that can be used to ensure that future activities are methodologically robust, and that ‘no harm’ is done when tackling sensitive issues and divisive topics. In terms of new **knowledge**, the *Shared Futures* report is providing RYCO with a baseline for its monitoring and evaluation framework, and there are plans to replicate the perception study at regular intervals to assess progress.

In addition to its direct impact, **the UN project also had a recognised catalytic impact, providing RYCO with the credibility and trustworthiness to attract funding from other development partners** (see Table 2).

Donor	Project title	Project duration	Amount
Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs	ROUTE WB	Jan. 2019 – Dec. 2021	NOK 7,251,173
GIZ	Promotion of European Integration	Oct. 2019 – Nov. 2020	ALL 4,986,800
German Ministry of Foreign Affairs	School to School Youth Cooperation in Western Balkans	May 2019 – Dec. 2019	EUR 349,990
EU Commission	Enhancing youth cooperation and exchange in Western Balkans	Jan	EUR 500,000
SIDA	Institutional Capacity Building Support	June 2020 – May 2022	EUR 138,600
GIZ	Western Balkans Schools Exchange Scheme	Dec. 2020- March 2024	EUR 2,750,000
German Ministry of Foreign Affairs	2021 Western Balkans Berlin Summit Logo Competition	March 2021- June 2021	EUR 15,600
German Ministry of Foreign Affairs	RYCO Strategy and Youth Platform Development	July 2021 – Dec. 2021	EUR 349,930

⁵⁹ Interview with Fatos Mustafa, June 11th, 2021.

⁶⁰ Interview with Deborah Reynolds and Mario Mazic (PeaceNexus), June 25th, 2021.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs Poland	Polish Donation Agreement	Nov. 2019 – Sept. 2021	EUR 180,000
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Table 2 – RYCO’s donors contributions (Source: RYCO)⁶¹

“RYCO was an attractive idea from the very beginning, but the partnership with the UN provided credibility, which was essential to enable subsequent partnerships and funding” (Djuro Blanuša, former RYCO Secretary General)

Impact ‘on’ and ‘beyond’ project participants

As discussed above, the project approach was to engage a limited number of selected participants with specific characteristics (English fluency, IT skills and connection, and an open and curious mindset in relation to other groups) that set them apart from the rest of the population. The underpinning assumption was that these participants would get to know and understand each other better, and hopefully create long-lasting collaborations and friendships. At the same time, these participants would be supported in reaching out to others within their communities, to unlock a positive catalytic effect on peace and reconciliation.

The evaluation found that the project has certainly had an impact on direct participants in strengthening their motivation, skills and confidence to be actors in peacebuilding. Probably this impact would have been much stronger in normal (‘non-Covid’) circumstances, with participants being able to meet each other in person and share downtime and spontaneous fun rather than only structured activities (as one person put it, “these things really happen over coffee”).

Even if constrained by an online format, the project managed to facilitate quality contact and connections. This impact appears to closely correlate with the continuity and consistency of the support: as discussed below, the teachers’ group – which had continuous support by the same expert consultant throughout the process - reported a high level of satisfaction, closer connections, and impact on themselves and their students. The network shows great potential for future joint activities across schools. Students reported a positive impact from the joint activities they attended (even though they were delivered online). Reiterating the relevance of the project, teachers noted that students do not often have the opportunity to meet their peers in other schools. There was one instance reported of students privately organising a face-to-face visit to each other (Serbia-North Macedonia).

Problems with the online format were more often reported alongside other organisational problems in the case of the Y-PEER group and Youth Advisory Groups, although most participants still agreed that participation was still worthwhile (as discussed above under EQ3). The limits of the online format in creating lasting connections were most evident in the Regional Youth Peace Lab, which was by design a one-off, short-term activity: while respondents to the online survey generally shared positive feedback on their own experience, most teams had not clear plans to meet up in the future.

⁶¹ In addition, RYCO and the French Agency for Development co-fund the project RISE (Regional Incubators for Social Entrepreneurs) - https://www.rycowb.org/?page_id=7816.

Q21 What next? Please rate the following statements

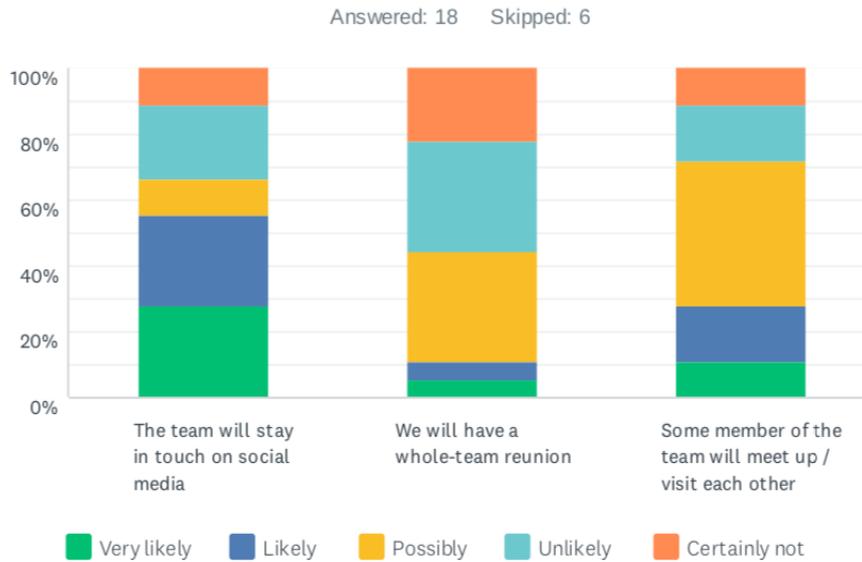


Figure 4 - Feedback from participants in the Youth Peace Lab about future plans for the teams to stay in touch virtually on in real life (n=18)

The indirect impact ‘beyond’ participants is more difficult to assess, particularly within the time limits and methodological constraints of the evaluation. Teachers were particularly cautious in identifying positive impact on school management and communities, and recommended follow-up initiatives to adopt a ‘whole school’ approach (including all teachers, non-teaching staff and management, and parents). In some cases, it was reported that the schools increased their project management capacity as a result of the project. There is some anecdotal sign of positive further contact being enabled through follow-up activities, but overall no strong claims can be made. This is hardly surprising given the limited duration of the project, and the circumstances of its implementation: building on the initial positive impact on participants will require further support.

Impact on discourse shifting and challenging divisive narratives

An overarching question is whether the project had an impact in shifting discourses and narratives around inter-group relations in the Western Balkans. At this stage, any reflection on this is to a large degree speculative, as project activities have only recently been completed. There is some indication – based on informants’ perceptions, rather than hard data - that the project has helped to make peace-related issues ‘part of the conversation’ in contexts where these are not perceived as relevant for youth. As a promising example of policy impact, the new UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework for Bosnia-Herzegovina (2021-2025), currently in draft format, considers the youth perception survey as a data source on its indicator “Proportion of people who express a general level of trust in society” part of Outcome 5 “By 2025, there is stronger mutual understanding, respect and trust among individuals and communities”.

EQ5: To what extent did the project support the engagement of young women and girls in peacebuilding and reconciliation in the Western Balkans region, and contribute to addressing gender inequality and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation?

The project strived to be gender-sensitive in design and implementation. By design, the project has a gender mark score of 2, meaning that the project had gender equality as a “significant objective”⁶², with 30% of total budget allocated in direct pursuit of gender equality and women’s empowerment. At the implementation stage, gender aspects have been considered in the selection of participants, development of terms of reference, as well as funding decisions on specific activities. There was a commitment to go beyond a binary and cis-normative notion of gender equality as ‘parity’ of young women and men in participants. In research process of Output 4, women-only and men-only focus groups have been organised in some (but not all) cases.⁶³ The project tackled homophobia as part of a broader focus on fighting prejudice and discrimination. Several grants and best innovative ideas have tackled gender discrimination, gender-based violence and sexism, as per examples provided elsewhere in this report.

The evaluation could not find evidence that the project had an impact in advancing gender equality in the region. It can be argued, however, that having a visible impact on deeply entrenched gender norms and dynamics would be an unrealistically ambitious goal for a short-term project, which by design did not include specific gender-focused activities, and which was implemented in the context of a global pandemic that prevented in-person activities from taking place. A gender lens was incorporated in the activities and methodologies, and some grants and ‘best innovative ideas’ focused specifically on gender-related themes (gender-based violence, sexism).

The research report, along with tools and methodologies, contributed to framing gender issues in a way that highlights their connection to peace and conflict. Like elsewhere in the world, gender and conflict issues are closely interconnected in the Western Balkans. The 1990s conflicts led to a ‘re-patriarchisation of society’ (Haider, 2017), and the reaffirmation of a notion of militant masculinity. Therefore, how peace and conflict issues evolve will have a clear effect on gender dynamics, and vice-versa. It is important to connect gender and peace programming. The *Shared Futures* report is a step in this direction. Noteworthy is also the approach to gender in the teachers’ toolkit and Y-PEER manual report, which adopt Johan Galtung’s tripartite distinction of violence. These identify gender-related examples at all three levels: rape as an instance of *direct violence*; lack of women’s rights as a case of *structural violence*; and sexist humour, patriarchal norms and behaviours, and early marriage as an example of *cultural violence*. The toolkit gives guidance on how to recognise sexism in everyday life, for example in songs’ lyrics or jokes.

As a general trend, project activities seem to have attracted more women than men. This was the case at various levels, particularly with the teachers’ group, the Y-PEER facilitators, and the participants in the Youth Peace Lab (as discussed above under EQ3), but was also

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https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/pbf_guidance_note_on_gender_marker_scoring_2019.pdf

⁶³ As the number of focus group discussion was limited, a choice was made in each case as to whether to organise them along gender lines or ethnic/linguistic lines.

reported further down the line in ‘best innovative ideas’ (although participation breakdown by gender was not available in all cases). This reflects a consideration, shared by many throughout the Western Balkans, that social activism is seen more as a “women’s thing” in the region, reflecting a patriarchal mentality of women as carers, and social notions of tough masculinity that privileges self-interest and monetary gain. One should be wary, therefore, to equate high participation of girls and young women in projects to having achieved gender equality: in many cases, the difficult part is not to include female participants, but rather to find a way to reach out to young men and motivate them to engage in peacebuilding, challenging the widely held idea that peacebuilding and social activism are not ‘a man’s place’. In this sense, it is unclear to what extent the project has succeeded in challenging narratives about division of gender roles.

Young people in rural areas faced the greatest challenges in participation in project activities. The above considerations should not distract from the need to provide targeted opportunities for both female and male youth in rural and remote areas, and other contexts where patriarchal norms are particularly strong. For young men, this means that prevalent concepts of masculinity are even more difficult to escape; for young women, it means that it may not be considered socially appropriate for them to join project activities.

Music	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Analyze song lyrics of popular music genres through a gender lens. How do they approach gender? (e.g., stereotypes about boys and girls, about love, about relationships between genders.) How do these gender depictions contribute to (un)healthy relationships, families and communities? ▪ Critically examine racist, ethnocentric and sexist lyrics in music and discuss the ethics of music production and consumption. At what point does freedom of expression feed into cultures of violence? ▪ Consider ways to use music to unite people and communities that have been divided by conflict? Study the example of “Musicians Without Borders”. Organize with the help of teachers, families and musicians in your community an inclusive and participatory music gathering.
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Box 7 – example of exercise to spot sexism in everyday life – from the Teachers’ toolkit

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The Joint Project was an ambitious and important PBF investment. The project clearly responded to the needs and priorities identified by RYCO during its first Strategic Planning process, and supported this young institution at a key stage of its institutional development. In so doing, the project contributed to the ongoing process of dialogue and reconciliation in the region. RYCO is today in a very different place compared to when the project started in 2018 – and while these changes cannot be straightforwardly attributed to the Joint Project, robust claims of contribution can be made.

The design of the project encompassed many layers of complexity and unresolved tensions, which were particularly difficult to navigate in the short timeframe of an IRF project. While these tensions have been exacerbated by Covid, they were already present at the design stage. Three main dimensions can be highlighted.

- *Joint nature of the project.* The project brought together the expertise of three UN agencies, each leading on distinct outputs of the project. This output-based distinction was a defining feature of the project. While all outputs converged towards the project’s peacebuilding outcome, they were designed and implemented largely in a self-contained way, with very few points of contact. The expectation was that RYCO would provide the overarching coherence of the project, ‘connecting the dots’ between outputs. The limited degree of synergy among outputs is not necessarily a problem *per se*, but it does call for realistic expectations as to the degree of aggregate impact that can be expected at the end of the project – in other words, the degree to which the project can be expected to be greater as a ‘whole’ than the sum of its constituent parts. If such aggregation is desired, its forms and modalities should be clearly spelled out at the design stage, and reflected in the project’s workplan and implementation.
- *Regional nature of the project.* The project had a regional nature in that it covered the whole of the Western Balkans region, supporting RYCO at Headquarters as well as its Local Branch Offices. The unresolved tension concerned the role of UN Country Offices. The degree and modalities of Country Offices engagement has varied greatly among the three agencies. In the case of UNICEF, Country Offices were not substantially involved, as the regional dimension of the project was seen as coming from RYCO itself. UNDP Country Offices were involved in a supporting role, with the budget being centrally managed in Albania, while in the case of UNFPA Country Offices received a share of the budget and appear to have had a more substantial involvement. This difference in approaches among the UN partners was one factor contributing to the lack of synergy in implementation across outputs, and confronted RYCO with different implementation modalities for each output. There are pros and cons for different degrees of Country Offices engagement: a higher degree of engagement increases national-level relevance and ownership, but also adds time and complexity at every stage. For future interventions of these nature, it will be important to explicitly clarify from the outset what the role of Country Offices is intended to be, and seek a common approach across different UN partners. The transaction costs of Country Office engagement, in terms of time and resources, need to be reflected in the project workplan and budget.
- *Role of RYCO.* A fundamental unresolved tension in the project was the twofold role of RYCO - as the project’s Implementing Partner and the main recipient of institutional support. The fact that RYCO was a young institution, lacking systems and procedures, was the very *raison d’être* of the project – yet in its role as an Implementing Partner, RYCO was expected to have these systems and procedures in place to start with. This tension does

not appear to have been anticipated at the design stage, and only emerged with the micro-assessment that was brought about by the costed extension for Output 4.

On a similar note, the intergovernmental nature of RYCO ensured the relevance of the project: RYCO is a unique institution precisely because it is intergovernmental (and one of rare forums of regional cooperation between the governments of Belgrade and Pristina) - yet this intergovernmental nature also made RYCO an unusual Implementing Partner, and at times slowed down its decision-making process.

The project design did not include a formal Theory of Change, besides a paragraph included in the project document. A more structured Theory of Change exercise at the design stage could have helped to anticipate risks, critically discuss assumptions, and navigate the tensions outlined above.

The project largely achieved its objectives under the extraordinarily challenging circumstance of a global pandemic. Travel restrictions and social distancing measures affected the very core of the project's vision (promote peace and social cohesion through youth mobility and exchanges). Nonetheless, the project implemented a wide array of peace-related activities, engaged young men and women in the Western Balkans, and generated some promising signs of impact, as discussed above under EQ4. Despite challenges and frustrations associated with online activities, the overwhelming majority of interviewees felt that participating in the project was still worthy and meaningful. A few key lessons emerge from the project with regard to the implementation of online activities:

- Participants' satisfaction and indication of impact were directly correlated with the continuity and consistency of support. In particular, the work on peacebuilding education seems to have been highly successful at facilitating quality contact among teacher, largely thanks to the continuous support provided by the same expert consultant. This helped to tailor the online format to the needs and priorities of participants, leaving time and space for informal exchange and personal reflection.
- Finding the right pace is crucial: participants cannot be expected to maintain the same degree of continuous engagement and attention online as they would with in-person activities. It may be necessary to rein in the ambition and coverage of online activities to counter screen fatigue. Experimenting with hybrid approaches (e.g. mixing online sessions with offline assignments) has proved successful for the project.
- The importance of being mindful of the overall Covid-19 context cannot be overestimated. The pandemic had a huge human and social toll, and many participants were coping with illness or loss of loved ones, trauma, and anxiety. In this context, it is important that activities do not 'over-ask', and focus on providing participants with a meaningful way to stay engaged and motivated at a difficult time.

A number of recommendations emerge from this evaluation to inform future interventions in the Western Balkans.

Future interventions should strengthen efforts to reach out to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and minority groups, as well as youth living in rural areas. The Joint Project has made an attempt in this direction, but its outreach was hampered by Covid-19 conditions, which prevented mobility and made IT connectivity a pre-condition for participation. The local workshops and best innovative ideas in Output 2, and the mini-grants in Output 4, are ways in which the Joint Project attempted to have a broader outreach. A reflection on the learning from these local level activities (which were not covered in detail in this evaluation) should inform the design of future interventions.

Future interventions should continue to support the involvement of girls and young women, by tackling the specific challenges faced by girls and young women in rural areas and context where patriarchal norms are particularly strong. At the same time, peacebuilding projects should recognise and address prevalent notion of masculinity that prevent young men from participating in peacebuilding and social cohesion activities, seen as ‘uncool’ or ‘feminine’ (or make them at risk of bullying and social backlash if they do participate).

RYCO, UNICEF and other UN agencies should build on the work started with the teachers’ group, and expand support to ‘whole of schools’ including school administration and school communities. Crucial to this is to ensure high-quality translations of the toolkit and teaching materials on the online portal in all languages of education in the Western Balkans. Exchange of learning with the Dialogues For the Future (DFF) project is recommended to build a strong evidence base on ‘what works’ when integrating peacebuilding in education, with a view to then engage Ministries of Education in discussing institutionalisation into formal curricula.

RYCO, UNFPA and other UN agencies should continue to nurture the Y-PEER group of trainers, and identify ways in which they can contribute to ongoing and future peacebuilding efforts. Given that an identified challenge in the ToT workshops was the different level of experience among Y-PEER trainers, a possible next step would be to provide follow-up training and mentoring at different levels (something that the Y-PEER methodology is uniquely suited for). Possible connections can be established with the work done in schools, where Y-PEER trainers could support teachers in designing and implementing extra-curricular activities.

RYCO, UNDP and UNFPA should continue to promote the Shared Futures report, finding new ways to implement the advocacy component of the project after the Covid-19 pandemic subsides. Ensuring good quality translation of the report is crucial in this regard. In parallel, it is important to capture the learning emerging from the ‘experiment’ of engaging young people in the research design. This is particularly important to ensure the replicability of the methodology and process (something that RYCO plans to do at regular intervals). The project has shown that doing research ‘with’ rather than just ‘on’ youth is possible and meaningful, but also that it raises challenges that should be carefully considered.

The project has accompanied RYCO through a process of significant change and expansion. Its design phase largely coincided with RYCO’s strategic planning process for its first strategic plan (2019-2021). Almost three years later, the project ends at a time when RYCO has just entered its strategic planning process for its next phase. In this regard, the project evaluation identifies three priority areas for reflection:

- **Reflect on the persistent tension between administrative and financial rigour, on the one hand, and engagement of grassroots organisations, on the other hand.** Looking at the experience of other grant-making bodies (in the region and elsewhere) may be useful to fine-tune the requirements to a level that is ‘just right’ for RYCO’s mission to support grassroots organisations engaged in local level peacebuilding. For example, RYCO may want to consider a tiered approach, with smaller pilot grants (with limited budget and limited requirements), which serve to build capacity, and then larger, more administratively demanding grants for more experienced organisations or organisations that have ‘graduated’ from the initial grants.
- **Undertake a systematic mapping and analysis of its grants,** not only against its strategic priorities but also (in more detail) against thematic areas of work (e.g. countering hate

speech on social media; fighting sexism; etc.). This will allow RYCO to build a ‘critical mass’ of activity around key themes with distinctive policy influence; connect activists that work on particular themes across the region and facilitate shared learning; and possibly nurture specific areas through thematic calls.

- **Consider ways in which the RYCO regional approach can be complemented by national-level peacebuilding strategies.** So far, the focus on RYCO has been on connecting young people across borders; this is important and should continue. Yet as RYCO enters a new phase, it is also crucial to reflect on the diversity of the needs and priorities in the Western Balkans, and how this can be reflected in its grant-making process. For example, our consultation in Bosnia-Herzegovina have highlighted that – while cross-border dialogue is welcome – there is an unmet need for similar activities focusing on youth dialogue and school exchanges between the Federation and the Republika Srpska. At a time when the Local Branch Offices have acquired legal status and are ready to play a more prominent role, the Strategic Planning process can serve as an important forum to outline these national-level priorities.

The Joint Project has highlighted the need, timeliness, and potential of peacebuilding interventions in the Western Balkans. The PBF should continue to invest in the region, adopting a strategic and long-term approach. While the specific forms of this support will depend on the outcome of the PBF regional application, future PBF interventions should build on a joint reflection of the lessons emerging from the three PBF projects in the Western Balkans.⁶⁴ A lessons learned event might be considered as a way to structure this joint reflection.

⁶⁴ In addition to the Joint Project evaluated here, these were the *Dialogues For the Future* (a joint project of UNDP, UNICEF and UNESCO to promote dialogue and social cohesion in and between Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia) and the project *Empowering Youth for a Peaceful, Prosperous, and Sustainable Future in Kosovo*, which brought together UNICEF, UNDP and UN Women.

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List of interviews

United Nations

Brian Williams, former UN Resident Coordinator in Albania
Rodika Goci, Project Coordinator, UNDP Albania
Elida Nuri, Advocacy and Communications Analyst, UNFPA Albania
Mirlinda Bushati, Project Specialist, UNICEF Albania
Susanna Dakash, Youth, Peace and Security Specialist, UNDP Istanbul Regional Centre (until May 2021)
Alma Mirvić, Joint UN Regional Programme Coordinator, UNDP-Bosnia Herzegovina
 Samid Sarenkapic, Project Manager, UNFPA Bosnia-Herzegovina
 Ferdinand Nikolla, Joint Project Coordinator, UNDP Kosovo* (until April 2021)
Besnik Sherifi, UNFPA Kosovo*
Romela Popovic, Project Manager, UNDP North Macedonia
Jovanka Grigorijevic, UNFPA North Macedonia
Jelena Miljanic, Programme Manager, UNDP Montenegro
Bogdanka Tasev Perinovic, Project coordinator, UNDP Serbia
Nevena Sovic, SHR and Youth Programme Analyst, UNFPA Serbia
Jovana Petrovic, UNFPA Serbia

RYCO

Djuro Blanuša, former Secretary General (RYCO HQs)
Fatos Mustafa, former Deputy Secretary General (RYCO HQs)
Albert Hani, Secretary General (RYCO HQs)
Vladica Jovanovic, Project Leader, (until May 2021, RYCO HQs)
Jan Kulenovic, Director of Programmes (RYCO HQs)
Matilda Karcanaaj, Monitoring & Evaluation Coordinator (RYCO HQs)
Lorena Elezi, Grants Officer (RYCO HQs)
Bojana Bulatović, Program Manager (RYCO HQs)
Kreshnik Loka, Head of LBO (Albania)
Flutura Brakaj, Program Assistant & Grants Officer RYCO (Albania LBO)
 Berina Bukva, Head of LBO (Bosnia-Herzegovina)
Krenare Gashi, Head of LBO (Kosovo*)
 Besarta Halimi, Evaluation Assistant (Kosovo* LBO)
 Ramadan Sokoli, Local Programme officer (Kosovo* LBO)
Vladimir Gjorgjevski, Head of LBO (North Macedonia)
Edin Koljenović Head of LBO (Montenegro)
Ivana Antonijevic, Head of LBO (Serbia)

Youth representatives in RYCO Governing Board

 Françeska Muço (Albania)
Edis Prapashtica (Kosovo*)
Andrea Micanovic (Montenegro)
Marko Kostic (Serbia)

Project participants

• Teachers

Eljon Shiba (Albania)
Nevila Aliaj (Albania)
Ermira Ymeraj (Albania)
Marjola Ceka (Albania)
Branka Ljubojević Kukić (Bosnia -Herzegovina)
Elma Škiljo (Bosnia-Herzegovina)
Medina Sokolović-Alajmović (Bosnia-Herzegovina)
Fitim Terstena (Kosovo)
Tringa Siqeca (Kosovo)
Irena Strejkić (North Macedonia)
Daniela Boshnakovska – Vangelova (North Macedonia)
Sunčica Belinska- Andov (North Macedonia)
Katrina Berišaj (Montenegro)
Ana Vukosavović Četković (Montenegro)
Mehdija Adrović (Montenegro)
Vesna Vojvodić Mitrović (Serbia)
Katarina Marković (Serbia)
Jovan Gavrilović (Serbia)
Ivana Parčina (Serbia)

• YPEER trainers

Eleni Nanaj (Albania)
Jorena Xhaferraj (Albania)
Klajdi Kaziu (Albania)
Amina Sačić (Bosnia -Herzegovina)
Ilma Čosić (Bosnia-Herzegovina)
Mario Vrhovac (Bosnia-Herzegovina)
Tamara Vucic (Kosovo)
Egzona Bokshi (Kosovo)
Majlinda Behrami (Kosovo)
Blagica Eftimova (North Macedonia)
Blendi Hodai (North Macedonia).
Teodora Mileska (North Macedonia)
Samra Radoncic (Montenegro)
Dejana Stošić (Serbia)
Jasmina Ristic (Serbia)
Ljubica Darković (Serbia)
Velimir Milošev (Serbia)

• Youth Advisory Group

Mersi Shehu (Albania)
Stiven Shala (Albania)
Romina Kali (Albania)
Samir Beharic (Bosnia-Herzegovina)
Damjan Jugovic (Bosnia-Herzegovina)
Anesa Colakovic (Kosovo)
Arber Selmani (Kosovo)
Mehdi Sejdiu (Kosovo)
Kristina Angelevska (North Macedonia)
Rina Osmani (North Macedonia)

Petar Gjorgjioski (North Macedonia)
Tereza Vujošević (Montenegro)
Ljubica Smolovic (Montenegro)
Esmin Imeri (Montenegro)
Velimir Milošev (Serbia)
Katarina Čížek (Serbia)

Experts/ observers interviewed for the conflict analysis

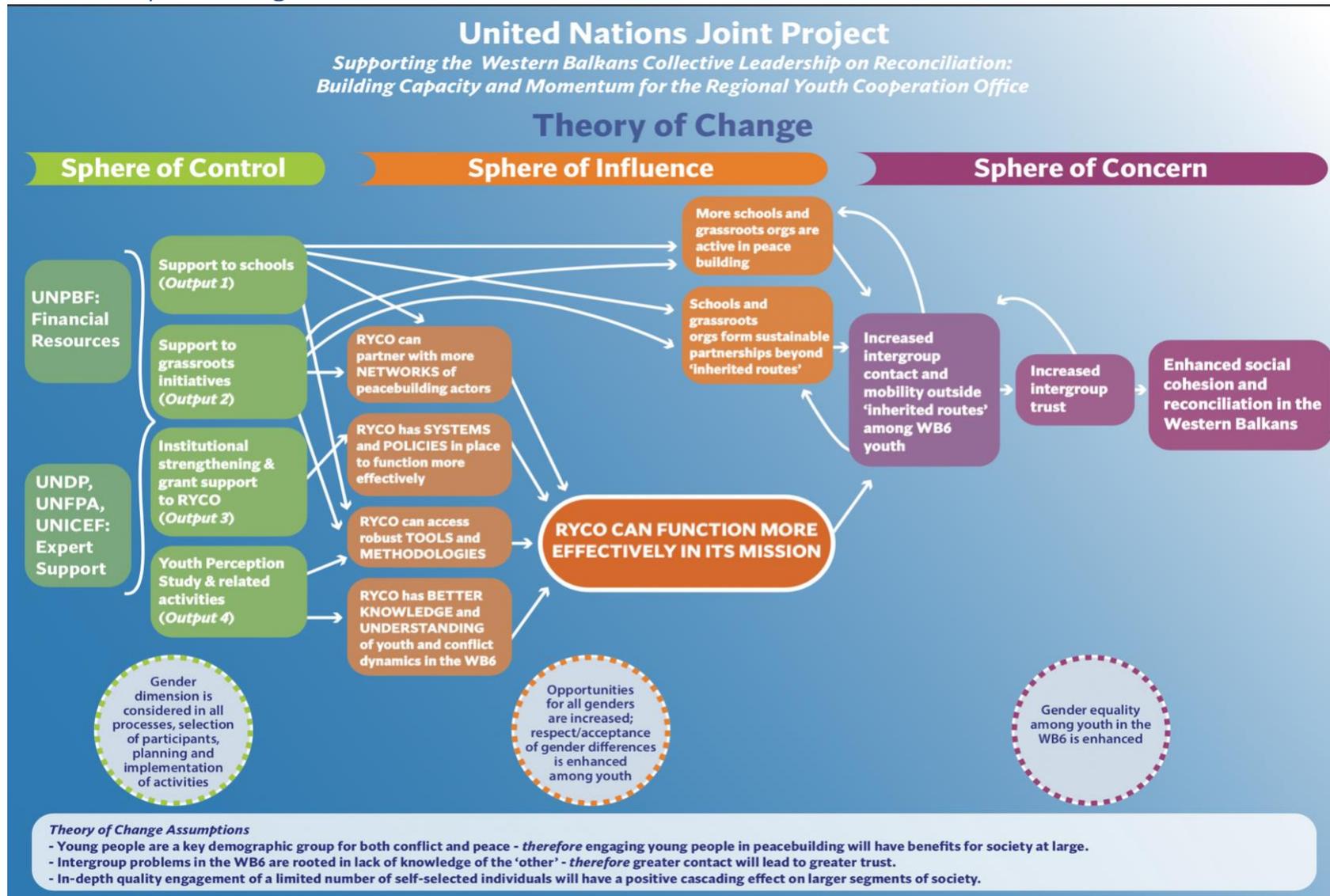
Enri Hide, Institute for Peace and Security – Albania
Enriketa Papa, Historical Institute, University of Tirana – Albania
Ram Hadroj, Roma Youth Organization “Vish kepuçet e mia” – Albania
Esmeralda Dida, Youth organization “GUXO” – Albania
Lučiano Kaluža, co-funder, KUVI (Constructive use of war veterans experience) program – Bosnia-Herzegovina
Katarina Vučković, Head of the Department for Youth Policies and Youth Work, Institute for Youth Development KULT from Sarajevo – Bosnia-Herzegovina
Bojana Trninić, Founder of the Academy for Political Leaders of BiH run by the NGO Perpetum Mobile Institute for Youth and Community Development (Banja Luka) – Bosnia-Herzegovina
Valdete Idrizi, Peace activist and former Member of Parliament – Kosovo*
Tatjana Lazarevic, Peace activist and journalist – Kosovo*
Nikola Zečević, Department for History of diplomacy, University of Donja Gorica - Montenegro
Ajša Hadzibegović, trainer, facilitator, consultant at FranklySpeaking - Montenegro
Aida Petrović, Executive Director of NGO Prima. - Montenegro
Harald Schenker, incoming Director of Forum ZFD – North Macedonia
Elena Dimovska, Project Coordinator at the National Youth Council – North Macedonia
Ivan Djuric, Programme Director of Youth Initiative for Human Rights Serbia
Svetlana Stanarevic, Faculty of Security Studies, University of Belgrade- Serbia
Simone Remijnse, Project Manager, PAX for Peace
Dion van den Berg, Senior Policy Adviser, PAX for Peace
Deborah Reymond, Western Balkans Programme Manager, PeaceNexus
Mario Mažić, Advisor, PeaceNexus
Sara Clarke-Habibi, International Consultant

Annex 1: Evaluation Framework

<i>Evaluation Criteria</i>	<i>Evaluation Questions</i>	<i>Key dimensions of analysis/ sub-questions</i>	<i>Methods</i>
Relevance Coherence	EQ1: Did the Joint Project respond to key peacebuilding priorities in the Western Balkans?	<p>Was the design of the Joint Project informed by a sound understanding of conflict causes, manifestations, and capacity for peace?</p> <p>Did the project design incorporate views and perspectives of young people in the sub-region?</p> <p>Was the project based on a robust Theory of Change? Were its assumptions evidence-based?</p> <p>Was the project coherent with national priorities of the Western Balkans?</p> <p>Did the project complement other existing interventions?</p> <p>Was the implementation of the Joint Project relevant to the context, particularly in view of the Covid-19 pandemic?</p> <p>How was the risk of ‘doing harm’ considered and addressed in project design and implementation?</p>	<p>Desk review of project documentation</p> <p>Desk review of other key projects & initiatives in the region</p> <p>Conflict analysis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rapid literature review - KIIs with selected observers <p>KIIs – RYCO, UN agencies, participants (schools, youth organisations, young researchers)</p>
Efficiency	EQ2: Was the Joint Project well managed?	<p>How did the project perform vis-à-vis its original timeline, in each of the four outputs?</p> <p>How well did the collaboration among UN agencies work? How well did the relation with RYCO as an implementing partner work?</p> <p>Did the governance, management and financial arrangements of the project prove appropriate?</p> <p>How the covid-19 restrictions and protective measures affected implementation?</p>	<p>Desk review of project documentation</p> <p>KIIs – RYCO, UN agencies</p>

Effectiveness	EQ3: Was the Joint Project successful in delivering against its intended objectives?	Did the joint nature of the project provide a clear value added? Did the different partners have a strategic coherence of approach? To what extent did the various outputs cross-fertilise? How effective, clear and transparent was the project's targeting strategy?	Events observation Desk review of project documentation KIIs – RYCO, UN agencies
Impact Sustainability	EQ4: Are there initial indications that the Joint Project has led to enhanced social cohesion and reconciliation in the Western Balkans? If so, are these changes sustainable?	Has the project reinforced RYCO's capacity to act as a force for peace in the Western Balkans? Has the project had a positive impact on participants' views and perceptions? Has the project provided participants with skills, knowledge, tools and confidence to act as peacebuilding actors? Is there evidence to claim that the project had a catalytic impact on promoting cooperation and challenging divisive narrative, beyond project participants? Has the project resulted in any negative impact? How likely it is that these changes will be sustained after the end of project funding?	Desk review of project documentation Online surveys (grant-holders, youth lab participants) KIIs – RYCO, UN agencies, participants (schools, youth organisations, young researchers)
Gender-responsiveness	EQ5: To what extent did the project support the engagement of young women and girls in peacebuilding & reconciliation in the Western Balkans region, and contributed to address gender inequality and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation?	How sensitive to gender dynamics has the project been in its design and implementation? Has the project attempted to challenge the underlying causes of gender inequality? If so, to what extent has it succeeded? To what extent has the project actively addressed negative perceptions and discrimination against LGBT groups in the WB?	Desk review of project documentation Online surveys (OCs grantees, Youth Peace Labs participants) KIIs – RYCO, UN agencies, participants (schools, youth organisations, young researchers)

Annex 2: Theory of Change



Annex 3: Topic guides for interviews

Interviewer	Date and time	Language of interview
Name of interviewee	Gender	Country
<i>Notes about interview (e.g. interviewee was distracted, connection was disturbed...).</i>		

Introduction

- This independent evaluation has been commissioned to assess the UN Joint Project *Supporting the Western Balkans' Collective Leadership on Reconciliation: building capacity and momentum for the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO)*. The evaluation team is composed by 6 national consultants and one lead international consultant.
- As part of this evaluation, we'll like to hear from you about your experience in the management of the project.
- We are keen to hear about both what worked well and what did not work well – as this will help project partners to improve in the future.
- All the views that you will express will be confidential and we will not share the interview transcripts with RYCO, the UN Agencies, or any other party. Findings will only be reported in aggregate form.
- The interview will last about 45 minutes. You are free to stop the interview at any point.
- Do you have any question for me before we start the interview?
- Do you consent to proceed with the interview?

Recording (optional)

If the interviewer would like to record the interview:

- I would like to record the interview in order to help with note-taking. The recording will not be shared with anyone else, and it will be destroyed once the interview has been transcribed. You can refuse recording if you prefer.

Informant agrees to interview	YES	NO
Informant agrees to recording (if applicable)	YES	NO

UN COUNTRY OFFICES

Was the CO involved in project design? If yes, how?
How relevant is the project to the specific reality of [...]
Are there other similar (current or recent) projects implemented by the CO on youth, peace and security?
Are you aware of other projects addressing youth and peacebuilding issues in [...]? How do you think this project complements those interventions?

What do you think are the key gaps and unaddressed issues with regard to youth and peacebuilding in [...]?
How was the CO involved in project implementation?
For UNDP Country Offices: did you collaborate with UNFPA Country Office in project implementation? For UNFPA Country Offices: did you collaborate with UNDP Country Office in project implementation? <i>Note: this does not apply to Montenegro where there is no UNFPA Country Office.</i>
How did the collaboration play out with RYCO (HQs and LBOs)? <i>Note: please ask for details e.g. did you have regular meetings, etc.</i>
What challenges, if any, did you encounter in project implementation? <i>Note: informants will likely speak about Covid-19 at this point. It would be good to probe whether there are other challenges – not related to Covid-19</i>
To what extent do you think the project reached its objectives?
To what extent do you think that the project made a difference to peacebuilding and reconciliation in [...]? Can you give concrete examples?
To what extent do you see that the project contributed to empowering women and girls in [...]?
To what extent the project tried to change attitudes and perceptions concerning LGBT youth in [...]? To what extent was it successful in doing so?

RYCO LBOs

Was the LBO involved in project design? If so, how?
How relevant is the project to the specific reality of [...]? <i>Are there specific bits of the project that are not particularly relevant to [...]?</i>
Are you aware of other projects addressing youth and peacebuilding issues in [...]? How do you think this project complements those interventions?
What do you think are the key gaps and unaddressed issues with regard to youth and peacebuilding in [...]?
How was the LBO involved in day-to-day project implementation?

Did you encounter any challenges in project implementation? Which ones? <i>(note for interviewer: please explore the challenges with follow-up questions)</i>
To what extent do you think the project reached its objectives?
To what extent do you think that the project made a difference to peacebuilding and reconciliation in [...]? Can you give concrete examples?
Do you have any lessons or reflections to share about implementing a peacebuilding project under Covid-19 conditions?
To what extent do you see that the project contributed to empowering women and girls in [...]? Can you give examples?
To what extent the project tried to change attitudes and perceptions concerning LGBT youth in [...]? To what extent was it successful in doing so?

TEACHERS

Can you tell me a bit about yourself – what do you teach, where, etc?
<p>In your experience working with adolescents, how do you see the attitudes and perceptions of young people towards other groups? <i>Possible follow-up questions:</i> In general, would you say that your students are <i>more</i> or <i>less</i> open to other groups than their parents' generation? Based on your experience with students, what do you see as the key determinants of their attitudes vis-à-vis other groups? (e.g. parents' opinions, level/type of education, gender, etc.) What do you see as different attitudes of boys and girls with regard to peace and conflict? Do you have direct experience of young people in your school being openly hostile towards other groups, openly expressing prejudice or engaging in hate speech? Have you observed students being bullied or excluded due to their ethnic or linguistic group, and/or gender identity/ sexual orientation?</p>
<p>Can you tell me about how you came to be involved in this project? <i>Possible follow-up questions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was your main reason for wanting to be involved? • Did you have any worries or concerns when you first got involved? • Had you participated to any similar activities in the past?
How did the project go from your perspective?

<p><i>Possible follow-up questions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you enjoy most? • Is there anything you did not enjoy? Any challenges or disappointments? • Is there anything that you did not expect or that surprised you?
<p>What main changes came for you personally from participating in this project?</p>
<p>How did your students react to the project activities?</p>
<p>Did you experience any negative reaction or backlash about your participation in the project activities? (e.g. from school management, students, or parents)</p>
<p>What changes came for your students and school from participation in the project?</p>
<p>What do you think are the main obstacles going forward, to integrate peacebuilding and reconciliation into the school curriculum and system? What are key individuals/groups who should be involved? (E.g. school management, other teachers, students, parents)?</p>

YPEER

<p>Can you tell me a bit about yourself?</p>
<p>Can you tell me about how you came to be involved in this project? <i>Possible follow-up questions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was your main reason for wanting to be involved? • Did you have any worries or concerns when you first got involved? • Had you participated to any similar activities in the past?
<p>In your experience, how do you see the attitudes and perceptions of young people around you towards other groups? <i>Possible follow-up questions:</i> In general, would you say that your peers are <i>more</i> or <i>less</i> open to other groups than your parents' generation? Do you have direct experience of young people around you being openly hostile towards other groups, openly expressing prejudice or engaging in hate speech? Have you observed young people being bullied or excluded due to their ethnic or linguistic group, and/or gender identity/ sexual orientation? Are there any gender-specific differences?</p>
<p>How did the project go from your perspective? <i>Possible follow-up questions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you enjoy most? • Is there anything you did not enjoy? Any challenges or disappointments?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there anything that you did not expect or that surprised you?
<p>What main changes came for you personally from participating in this project?</p>
<p>Did you experience any negative reaction or backlash about your participation in the project activities? (e.g. from your family, friends, or community in general?)</p>
<p>What do you think are the obstacles going forward, to promote peacebuilding and reconciliation among young people and in society?</p>

YOUTH ADVISORY GROUP

<p>Can you tell me a bit about yourself?</p>
<p>Can you tell me about how you came to be involved in this project? <i>Possible follow-up questions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was your main reason for wanting to be involved? • Did you have any worries or concerns when you first got involved? • Had you participated to any similar activities in the past?
<p>In your experience, how do you see the attitudes and perceptions of young people around you towards other groups? <i>Possible follow-up questions:</i> In general, would you say that your peers are <i>more</i> or <i>less</i> open to other groups than your parents' generation? Are there differences between young men and young women? Do you have direct experience of young people around you being openly hostile towards other groups, openly expressing prejudice or engaging in hate speech? Have you observed young people being bullied or excluded due to their ethnic or linguistic group, and/or gender identity/ sexual orientation?</p>
<p>How did the project go from your perspective? <i>Possible follow-up questions:</i> What did you enjoy most? Is there anything you did not enjoy? Any challenges or disappointments? Is there anything that you did not expect or that surprised you?</p>
<p>What main changes came for you personally from participating in this project?</p>
<p>Did you experience any negative reaction or backlash about your participation in the project activities? (e.g. from your family, friends, or community in general)?</p>
<p>What do you think are the obstacles going forward, to promote peacebuilding and reconciliation among young people and in society?</p>



Annex 4 – Conflict Analysis Guidance for National Consultants

Why are we doing this?

The aim of the country-level conflict analyses is to provide an overview of key issues related to youth and peacebuilding. This will enable the evaluation to assess the relevance of the UN Joint Project at the national as well as at the regional level.

How are we doing it?

The two key methods for conducting the analysis are (1) a country-specific Rapid Literature Review and (2) interviews with expert informants.

Guidance for Rapid Literature Review

In order to guarantee a level of objectivity in the search, the following criteria have been established:

Search terms	Youth AND conflict AND peace AND [...]
Search Engines	JSTOR (First page results) DuckDuckGo (First page results)
Search dates	2011- to present
Search languages	English and official national languages

Based on the above search, a consolidated list will be produced.

This list will then be manually screened for relevance, eliminating any entries that do not fit the purpose of the analysis. A note will be made of any elimination in the methodology section.

The list can then be complemented by additional materials that the consultants deem relevant for the analysis – including materials published before 2011. This is likely to be particularly important for countries that have not experienced violent conflict and for which, therefore, the results of the search may be less relevant. This should also be noted in the methodology section.

Guidance for Key Informants Interviews

The interviews should be contacted with experts, selected by the National Consultants based on their expertise in issues related to youth and peacebuilding. These can be, for example, NGOs representatives or academics. It is not required that the informants had an involvement with the project – they are selected on the basis of their expertise to provide an external perspective on the priorities of the country and, therefore, the relevance of the Joint Project.

The interviews will include a number of core questions – common to all countries – along with country-specific questions to be developed by the national consultants in advance and added to the topic guide below. The interviews will have a semi-

structured format, and consultants will be free to ask follow-up questions to probe on specific points.

Topic Guide for experts' interviews

Common questions

Conflict manifestations & causes

- What are your general considerations on the situation in [...] from a peace and security perspective?
- How do you see inter-group relations in [...]?
- Do you see any **manifestations of violence** today in [...]?
- Do you see any **risks of violence** flaring up in the short or medium term? [How likely do you think these risks are? What do you see as potential triggers?]
- *[If the previous questions were answered affirmatively]*, what do you see as the **causes** of these manifestations/risks?
- How do conflict manifestations and causes affect differently men and women?

Youth and inter-generational relations

- What are the generational implications of peace/conflict dynamics?
- Do you think that young people are, on average, *more or less* open to inter-group contact compared to their parents' generation?
- What do you see as the main issues affecting youth in [...]? What do you think are the main differences *within* the youth category? How do current issues affect young men and young women differently?

Peace engines

- What do you see as key 'peace engines' in society, i.e. elements that reduce risk of violence and strengthen the foundations for peace and resilience?
- What different roles do young women and men play in peacebuilding activities?
-

Analysis of current responses

- What are the key responses currently in place (e.g. existing programmes) to address causes and manifestations of conflict, and/or reinforce peace engines?
- How do current response engage young women and young men?
- What do you see as the key strengths and limitations of current responses?

Annex 5 – KIIs Analysis Guidance

This CP-level summary of interviews represents an intermediary ‘building block’ towards the evaluation report. Aim of the document is to summarise the results of the KIIs with project participants (i.e. teachers; Y-PEER trainers; and youth advisory group). The document also provides an initial data analysis and highlights implications for the final report.

Please identify each interview transcript with a code
[COUNTRY] - [TYPE OF PARTICIPANT] - [SEQUENTIAL NUMBER]
e.g. ALB-T-1; MNE-A-2 ...

Country	Type of participant
ALB BIH KSO MNE MKD SRB	T – Teacher P - Y-PEER A – Youth Advisory Group

Please make sure to:

- Specify how many of the interviews support a particular finding (e.g. “all interviewed teachers stated that...”, “2 out of 4 interviewed Y-PEER trainers stated that...”).
- Capture examples and anecdotes (e.g. one teacher reported that...). Highlight any difference of opinion related to particular characteristics (e.g. urban vs. rural teachers; social sciences vs. natural sciences teachers), where relevant;
- Highlight when particular opinions or views are voiced by teachers belonging to ethnic / linguistic minority groups (if known).
- Please include quotes that could be used in the final report. Quotes will be used anonymously, without attribution.
- Please include the interview code whenever you are reporting examples, anecdotes, or quotes (this is for internal purposes only and will not be included in the final report).

If you do not have data to answer a particular question, please note it (e.g. “no examples of this were given in the interviews”).

Group 1: Teachers

Total number of teachers in sample:

Total number of teachers interviewed:

If not all teachers in sample could be interviewed, please give details of the reasons (e.g. no response, no availability in the proposed time period):

Breakdown of interviewed teachers:

By gender		By school location	
Male		Capital city	
Female		Other city/town	
Other		Village/rural	
By school type		By subject	
General		History	
Vocational/technical		Social sciences	
Other		National language/lit	
		Foreign language/lit	
		Math/science	
		Other	

Why did the teachers join the initiative?

Please elaborate here on how the interviewed teachers came to join the project, and the reasons given for participating.

What is the teachers' experience with intergroup contact in their schools? (for example, do teachers think that bullying/ discrimination is an issue in their schools?)

How do teachers see their experience participating in the project? Did they find the project useful and enjoyable?

What changes have resulted from the project for the teachers themselves? In particular, have the teachers' own views and perceptions been changed?

What changes, if any, have resulted from the project for students?

What changes, if any, have resulted from the project for schools (including school management, school administration, etc.)?

Have the teachers personally experienced any opposition / backlash from students, parents, school leaderships, and/or others, with regard to the activities of the project?

What priorities do teachers see for 'next steps' after the project?

What do teachers see as the main challenges in sustaining and advancing the results of the project?

Please summarise here any gender-related observation/ finding emerging from the interviews (even if this is already mentioned as part of the points above).

Group 2: Y-PEER Trainers

Total number of trainers in sample:

Total number of trainers interviewed:

If not all trainers in sample could be interviewed, please give details of the reasons (e.g. no response, no availability in the proposed time period):

Breakdown of interviewed trainers

By gender		By age	
Male			
Female			
Other			
By ethnic/linguistic identity			

Why did the trainers join the initiative?

Please elaborate here on how the interviewed trainers came to join the project, and the reasons given for participating.

Had the trainers participated in other similar initiatives (aimed at peacebuilding, social cohesion, reconciliation etc.) before this one?

What is the trainers' experience with intergroup contact in their lives? (for example, have they personally experienced bullying/discrimination? Have they witnessed bullying/discrimination?)

How do trainers see their experience participating in the project? Did they find the project useful and enjoyable?

What changes have resulted from the project for the trainers themselves? In particular, have their own views and perceptions been changed?

What changes, if any, have resulted from the project to others?

Have the trainers personally experienced any opposition / backlash with regard to the activities of the project?

What priorities do trainers see for 'next steps' after the project?

What do trainers see as the main challenges in sustaining and advancing the results of the project?

Please summarise here any gender-related observation/ finding emerging from the interviews (even if this is already mentioned as part of the points above).

Group 3: Youth advisory group (Research)

Total number of advisors in sample:

Total number of advisors interviewed:

If not all advisors in sample could be interviewed, please give details of the reasons (e.g. no response, no availability in the proposed time period):

Breakdown of interviewed advisors

By gender		By age	
Male			
Female			
Other			
By ethnic/linguistic identity			

Why did the advisors join the initiative?

Please elaborate here on how the interviewed trainers came to join the project, and the reasons given for participating.

Had the advisors participated in other similar initiatives (aimed at peacebuilding, social cohesion, reconciliation etc.) before this one?

What is the advisors' experience with intergroup contact in their schools? (for example, have they personally experienced bullying/discrimination? Have they witnessed bullying/discrimination?)

How do advisors see their experience participating in the project? Did they find the project useful and enjoyable?

What changes have resulted from the project for the advisors themselves? In particular, have their own views and perceptions been changed?

What changes, if any, have resulted from the project to others?

Have the advisors personally experienced any opposition / backlash with regard to the activities of the project?

What priorities do advisors see for 'next steps' after the project?

What do advisors see as the main challenges in sustaining and advancing the results of the project?

Please summarise here any gender-related observation/ finding emerging from the interviews (even if this is already mentioned as part of the points above).

Summary of key findings and implications for the evaluation

Please share what you see as the key findings from the interview from participants which should be highlighted in the final evaluation report.

