

How ZOAC works towards peace

Understanding and addressing the reasons
why people engage in violence

50
ZOAC
YEARS

not alone

Preface

In 2023 ZOA is celebrating its 50th anniversary. In these 50 years the number and complexity of armed conflicts have increased, leading to violence, displacement and the loss of human lives. ZOA, in cooperation with local organisations, supports communities to restore their livelihoods but also to rebuild peace and stability. ZOA is a 'Peace Nexus organisation' with an integrated approach, deliberately searching for options to make effective contributions to peace through its work in different sectors.

"It is the vision of ZOA that all people have hope and live dignified lives in peaceful communities."

While commemorating the 50th anniversary and looking ahead, it is timely to review ZOA's peacebuilding work. To what extent has ZOA been able to address the different factors that contribute to people's engagement in violence? What are lessons learned that can provide guidance in future programming? An external consultant has conducted a literature review on the reasons why people engage in violence and has interviewed ZOA staff about ZOA's peacebuilding work in five countries. The study, combined with reflections of ZOA staff, resulted in this paper. We hope that this document provides food for thought and inspiration to the readers.

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1. Introduction

This paper addresses the question: why do some people choose violence – including the related concepts of ‘polarisation’ and ‘radicalisation’ – while others do not. Violence, polarisation and radicalisation: all three concepts refer to complex phenomena that are influenced by a variety of factors. These include socio-economic conditions, political instability, culture and identity, historical grievances, power dynamics, and individual psychology.

‘Violence’ is generally understood to refer to the intentional use of physical force, aggression or power with the aim of causing harm or damage to individuals, groups or property. It can take various forms, including physical, sexual, psychological or structural violence, and it manifests at different levels, between individuals, within a family, between communities, or between nations.

‘Radicalisation’ and to a lesser extent ‘polarisation’ are more contested concepts, subject to various interpretations and sometimes instrumentalised to serve particular agendas. ‘Polarisation’ is commonly understood as the process of dividing people into groups with opposing opinions. It is often associated with reduced empathy, a breakdown in communication between those with different opinions, and increased hostility. The meaning of ‘radicalisation’ has evolved to refer to the process by which people adopt extreme beliefs that deviate significantly from social norms. Today, the term is frequently associated with factors like propaganda, isolation and harmful worldviews; and it is often associated with specific religions. The focus of this paper is not limited to religious or political radicalisation but to a spectrum of narratives that may be used to justify violence.

The paper is organised in five sections. Following this introduction, the next section focuses on the diverse factors that may cause individuals or groups to adopt views, narratives and beliefs that lead to violence, based on a review of existing theories and evidence. The third section of the paper considers the factors that may cause people to refrain from engaging in violence. This sets the scene for

a reflection on how ZOA’s work contributes to reducing violence and building peace. ZOA’s approach is illustrated by five ZOA case studies that show a variety of strategies aiming to enhance people’s agency, well-being and opportunities, at both individual and community levels, thus building resilience to narrative and beliefs that may lead to violence. The fourth section summarises ZOA’s approach to reducing violence and building peace, with some reflections on successes and challenges. The paper concludes with suggested recommendations for ZOA and other NGOs working on peace, as well as for donors and policymakers.

The focus of this paper is not on what causes violent conflict per se but on what makes engaging in violence an attractive option; indeed, what may lead to it being perceived as the only available option. It considers what makes people susceptible to violent narratives, as well as the discourses and worldviews presented by those that mobilise armed violence. Rarely is the decision to engage in violence a simple ‘choice’. There are generally many contributory factors leading up to the decision to engage in violence. While the focus is often on national and sub-national factors – such as insecurity, poor livelihoods or governance – universal phenomena, such as climate change or rapid technological advances, may also contribute to engagement in violence. These factors interact in dynamic ways, influencing individuals differently based on their personal circumstances and vulnerabilities. The process is sometimes referred to as a ‘journey’, reflecting the complex confluence of interconnected global, national, local, familial and personal pressures and influences.



2. Factors that cause people to engage in violence

Numerous inter-related factors contribute to the decision to engage in violence. For this paper, these are clustered under five headings: Livelihoods, Politics, Socio-cultural factors, Gender and Climate change. A common thread in many of the factors that cause people to engage in violence is exclusion. The nature of that exclusion may be social, cultural, political, economic or often a mix of all of these, and it often has to do with grievances and perceived injustices. It may be underpinned by deep-rooted cultural or religious traditions that seem increasingly at odds with contemporary social, economic and political structures.

Livelihoods

Lack of economic opportunities

Many people become susceptible to narratives that promote violence partly because of exclusion from economic opportunities. The resultant poverty can create conditions of inequality and marginalisation, which fuel frustrations and provide fertile ground for violent views and belief systems to take root. Although poverty alone is rarely a direct cause of violence, it contributes to the emergence and spread of violent narratives through various inter-connected pathways.

When people feel excluded from economic opportunities, it can create a sense of injustice that politicians, armed groups or other influential actors are able to harness. They may exploit local grievances relating to resource distribution, land disputes or economic marginalisation, framing their discourses as the solution to these problems. Inequality is often a key factor, with rising economic disparities breeding resentment and alienation. This may fuel a sense of injustice and a feeling of being left behind, making disaffected individuals vulnerable to violent narratives.

Youth unemployment

High levels of unemployment, particularly among young people, also contribute to the appeal of narratives promoting violence. If individuals face long-term unemployment and experience discrimination in recruitment based on e.g. ethnic or political background, this may lead to frustration, and a sense of hopelessness. In such cases,

alternative worldviews that justify the use of violence may offer a sense of purpose and identity. Furthermore, politicians and armed groups may exploit the vulnerability and desperation of unemployed people by offering them financial incentives to take part in violence. However, some studies argue that unemployment alone is not a significant driver of violence, highlighting the complexity of the underlying factors and the need for multi-faceted analysis.

Disputes over land

In many societies, land is regarded as a crucial source: not just of wealth but also of status and identity. As land is generally a scarce and valuable resource, disputes over land rights may lead to conflict when competing groups or individuals feel their rights are threatened. Where land tenure is insecure and rights are contested, rival claims to land can lead to dispossession or exclusion from ownership. This may create tensions and disputes, especially if communities consider that their access to land is unjustly denied. The resultant sense of injustice may give rise to violence to right the perceived wrongs.

By framing land rights issues in terms of identity, historical injustices, or ethnic/religious divides, politicians or armed groups can manipulate narratives to advance their own agendas. For instance, they may promote ethno-nationalist narratives and advocate violence to reclaim or defend so-called ancestral lands. As well as a means of protecting or expanding their territorial control, political actors may exploit land-related grievances as a means of mobilising support and recruiting followers.

Politics

Political exclusion

Political exclusion contributes to the emergence and escalation of violence in various inter-related ways. First, it denies people the opportunity to have their concerns, interests, and perspectives represented in decision-making processes. Resentment may be fostered when citizens experience barriers to the representation of personal concerns. Limited civic space combined with poor, undemocratic governance make citizens feel unheard and marginalized. As a result, they may turn to violence as a means of expressing their grievances and demanding political change. Moreover, political exclusion undermines the legitimacy and effectiveness of peaceful political processes and institutions. When people perceive conventional political avenues as closed or ineffective, they may be more inclined to turn to radical ideas and narratives to address their political aspirations.

Political exclusion can also exacerbate existing feelings of alienation, especially when it reinforces identity cleavages within societies, based on factors such as ethnicity, religion, or nationality. This polarisation can create fertile ground for violent narratives that exploit and manipulate identity-based grievances, promoting a 'us versus them' narrative. When groups or individuals feel systematically excluded from political processes, they may become more receptive to narratives that promise to address their issues through violent means.

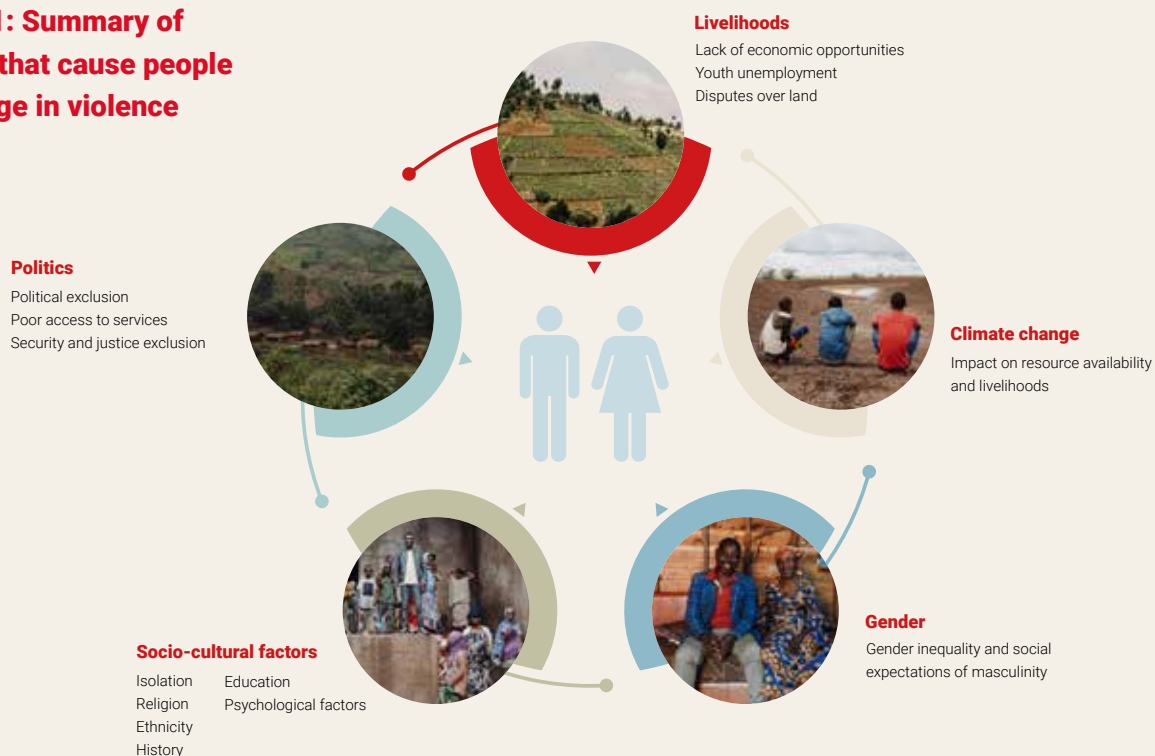
Poor access to services

There is also a more tangible dimension to political exclusion, which concerns access to services. Evidence shows that violent narratives appeal most in parts of countries far removed from the capital and centre of state power. In these peripheral regions and borderlands, communities are often largely cut off from the state by a lack of transport and other infrastructure, and receive very limited basic services, such as healthcare, education, sanitation and water. When communities lack these essential resources, it adds to their sense of marginalisation and exclusion, denying them the opportunity for social mobility, and exacerbating feelings of inequality and injustice. The absence of basic services weakens trust in government institutions. When communities perceive their governments as ineffective, unresponsive to their needs, and/or corrupt, they are more likely to turn to violence as an alternative solution or form of resistance against perceived oppression.

Security and justice exclusion

Security and justice provision are closely related to the decision to take up violent means if the state is perceived not to provide these services or to abuse their monopoly of force. The inability or unwillingness of the state to provide security and justice can erode its legitimacy in the eyes of the population. This creates an opportunity for local militias or armed groups to portray themselves as alternative providers of security, justice, and order. When communities feel unprotected and vulnerable due to the absence or ineffectiveness of state security forces, they may turn to other

Figure 1: Summary of factors that cause people to engage in violence



armed actors for protection. When a state fails to adequately protect its citizens, it creates fertile ground for politicians and armed groups to exploit grievances, gain support, and to carry out violent activities.

In addition, the evidence shows that abuses by state security actors are a primary trigger and powerful catalyst for people to turn to violent narratives. When state security actors engage in human rights violations, such as extra-judicial killings, torture, or arbitrary arrests, it can lead to a loss of trust in the state and its institutions. Such abuses fuel grievances, resentment, and a sense of injustice among affected populations. This can push individuals towards joining armed groups or militias.

Socio-cultural factors

Isolation

People living far from the centre of power tend to be more susceptible to violent narratives. They can feel socio-culturally isolated as well as excluded from state services for reasons of geography and access. If people feel marginalised from mainstream society due to factors such as ethnicity or religion, they may seek alternative avenues to find belonging and identity. This isolation creates fertile ground for violent narratives to take root, as extremist narratives can fill the void left by the absence of alternative viewpoints. Vulnerable individuals who lack exposure to diverse perspectives may become susceptible to radical ideas that promise a sense of purpose and empowerment. Moreover, limited social connections and networks can prevent dissenting voices and moderating influences from challenging extreme beliefs, thus reinforcing violent narratives.

Religion

While religion is often associated with radicalisation, it is important to note that most religions and religious communities promote peace, tolerance, and coexistence. However, certain factors within religious contexts can be manipulated or distorted to justify or incite violence. Firstly, radical ideological interpretations of religious texts or doctrines may be exploited to justify acts of violence as religiously sanctioned or mandated. Radical leaders or groups may also selectively interpret religious teachings to support their political or ideological agendas, often distorting the original message.

Social dynamics and group identity can also contribute to violent extremism. Religious communities often provide a sense of belonging, purpose, and identity. However, when these communities become insular and exclusive, they can foster an 'us' versus 'them' mentality, leading to hostility towards outsiders and potential dehumanisation, which may prepare the ground for radicalisation. In addition, in contexts where religious identities are intertwined with oppression or perceived injustices, religion can become a rallying point for mobilising armed resistance and revenge. Online platforms and social media have amplified the reach and impact of these religious, but also ethnic or political dynamics. Online echo chambers and virtual communities can reinforce extremist narratives and facilitate recruitment.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity is generally understood as referring to shared cultural, historical, or social characteristics that distinguish one group of people from another. It does not inherently cause people to engage



in violence, but it often plays a role in exacerbating tensions and divisions that may lead to violence. When ethnic identities are perceived as threatened or marginalised, it can create a sense of collective identity and solidarity within a particular ethnic group. This heightened sense of belonging to a particular identity can intensify inter-group competition, territorial disputes, and perceived threats to resources, which may escalate into violence. In addition, socio-economic disparities often intersect with ethnicity, leading to social exclusion, discrimination, and unequal distribution of resources. These inequalities often breed resentment, and a sense of injustice, which can lead to violence as a means of expressing grievances or seeking redress.

History

It is a truism that 'violence begets violence', and historical factors often contribute to the potential for violence. Past conflicts, experienced violence, and injustices can fuel animosities between ethnic or religious groups. Unresolved historical issues, such as land disputes or the legacy of colonialism, create fertile ground for violence when ethnic tensions resurface or are manipulated by political actors for their gain. Historical factors include the collective memory not just of past glories, but also of past humiliations; and the trauma associated with these can be transmitted from generation to generation. If these historical traumas are not addressed and processed, it risks perpetuating violence.

Education

Education plays an important but complex role in the dynamics of radicalisation. While education is generally considered a crucial tool for promoting tolerance, critical thinking, and peaceful coexistence, certain factors can contribute to radicalisation. Firstly, the quality and content of education can influence violent narratives. Educational systems may propagate discriminatory narratives, exclusionary narratives, or distorted historical narratives that promote animosity towards certain groups or cultures. Biased curricula or inadequate teaching methods can foster resentment, reinforce stereotypes, and fuel grievances, creating an environment conducive to radicalisation. Furthermore, some more traditional education systems which emphasise punishment for poor performance and behaviour, may inculcate a view of violence as an acceptable means of achieving one's goals.

At the same time, limited access to education – particularly in marginalised or conflict-affected areas – can contribute to vulnerability and susceptibility to violent narratives. Without access to education, individuals may lack the tools necessary to critically analyse and reject such narratives, leaving them susceptible to manipulation and indoctrination. Moreover, in the absence of education, they may conclude that violence is the only viable option for effecting change. In addition, a lack of educational opportunities

denies individuals the chance to acquire the knowledge and skills needed for economic empowerment. When individuals lack such opportunities, they may be more susceptible to recruitment by armed groups or militias that offer alternative paths, providing a sense of purpose, identity, and empowerment.

Psychological factors

Understanding an individual's psychology is key to understanding the appeal of narratives that justify violence. There is often a pathway towards violence, beginning with childhood experiences, leading to adolescent misconduct, and finally to adult use of violence. The accumulation of negative experiences, such as those associated with living in contexts of conflict and insecurity, can lead to a person becoming increasingly susceptible to the pull of violence.

In particular, trauma during childhood can lead to an increased need for identity, which can be fulfilled by extremist causes. People with pronounced personality traits – such as a craving for status, a propensity for aggression, or a yearning to belong – are also likely to be more susceptible to violent narratives. These traits may be reinforced by personal resentment and perceived injustices.

Psycho-social processes also play a significant role. Cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias or group-think, can reinforce extreme beliefs and prevent individuals from critically evaluating alternative viewpoints, such as those associated with a different ethnic or religious group. Cognitive dissonance may arise when an individual's existing beliefs clash with new information, potentially leading to a reaffirmation of extreme views. Politicians and armed groups often exploit these cognitive mechanisms, providing simple black-and-white explanations, and a sense of belonging to a distinct group with a shared cause.

Gender

Women and men may be attracted to violent narratives for different reasons, so it is essential to take a gendered perspective – while approaching this with nuance, recognising that individual motivations vary. If women feel marginalised and disempowered they may be more susceptible to narratives that promise a radical transformation of their circumstances. These may offer an identity through which they can align themselves with a perceived marginalised or oppressed group, providing a sense of empowerment and solidarity. Gender norms and perceptions of gender roles may also contribute to women's attraction to violent narratives. They may see violence as a way to challenge traditional gender norms and assert agency, particularly within patriarchal contexts.

The relationship between masculinity and violence is complex. While important to avoid generalisations, there are social expectations associated with masculinity that can intersect with the attraction to



violent narratives. Gender norms often link masculinity with traits such as dominance, physical strength, and assertiveness. Thus, violent narratives may appeal to men who believe that expressing aggression or exerting control aligns with these traditional notions of masculinity. In addition, these expectations may be reinforced by the role of women if they encourage men to adopt violence as a means of demonstrating their bravery and masculinity.

Meanwhile, socio-economic factors are also relevant, such as a lack of economic opportunities and in many contexts also a lack of marriage prospects, as this requires a costly dowry. Combined with the loss of traditional male privileges, these changes can threaten male identity and self-esteem for some men. By promising a return to traditional masculine gender norms, alternative narratives may seem to offer a solution to this identity crisis, and motivate men to turn to violence, for example cattle raiding in pastoralist societies. These narratives are perceived to provide a sense of belonging and an opportunity to reclaim power and agency that these men feel has been diminished.

Climate change

Most of the factors identified so far play out at national and sub-national levels; however, global events and processes also contribute to the rise of violent narratives. Chief among these is the world's rapidly changing climate. While climate change itself does not directly cause conflict, it acts as a 'threat multiplier', exacerbating existing socio-economic exclusion and political grievances, and thus increasing the risk of violence. This occurs particularly through its impact on resource availability and livelihoods. Climate-related phenomena such as droughts, floods, and desertification disrupt agricultural systems, and reduce access to water, land and other essential natural resources. These disruptions increase economic

hardship and competition over scarce resources, which may reinforce social tensions and conflicts, creating fertile ground for violent narratives to take root.

In addition, climate change induced environmental degradation can undermine social stability, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected regions. Disruptions in ecosystems, loss of biodiversity, and natural resource scarcity intensify conflicts over land, exacerbate inter-group tensions, and contribute to unrest. Other impacts, such as sea-level rise and droughts, are increasingly displacing people from their homes. Large-scale displacement and migration can lead to social upheaval, and in particular to increased resource competition between IDPs/refugees and host communities, which may exacerbate tensions between different ethnic or religious groups.

Conclusion

To conclude, as this section illustrates, a multitude of factors lead up to the decision to engage in violence. Each individual experiences his or her own 'journey' where the different factors influence each person differently based on their personal circumstances and vulnerabilities. As engagement in violence is often motivated by a sense of exclusion – from the political process, from access to basic services, from security and justice – it follows that part of the appeal of joining armed groups or movements lies in their offer of inclusion. They may be perceived to provide a sense of belonging and camaraderie, giving individuals a community and identity that they feel lacking in their lives. Violent narratives tend to define a clear 'enemy' and offer a sense of purpose, as well as a solution to perceived injustices.





3. Building resilience to violence

As noted above, there is no simple cause and effect that makes people susceptible to engaging in violence. Each individual is subject to a wide range of inter-linked influences and pressures. While understanding the factors that lead individuals to choose violent narratives is crucial, it is equally important to explore the factors that contribute to resistance against such narratives. Many people actively reject violence, so it is important to consider the underlying factors to inform preventive measures and to promote peaceful alternatives. There are several factors that can cause individuals to choose non-violence over violence.

Social networks

Strong social bonds and support systems – such as family, friends, and community networks – can play a significant role in deterring individuals from choosing violent narratives. These sorts of relationships provide emotional support, a sense of belonging, and alternative avenues for addressing complaints or frustrations. Positive role models who embody non-violence, inclusivity, and empathy are also important as they can inspire individuals to reject violent narratives. Examples of leaders, activists, or community members who advocate for peaceful approaches and promote dialogue can have a significant impact on shaping attitudes and behaviour.

Education

Education plays a critical role in building resilience to violent narratives. Schools often provide a safe space for students from different backgrounds to meet and get to know each other, thus breaking down negative stereotypes. At the same time, access to quality education is critical for fostering a more informed and nuanced understanding of the world. Education that promotes critical thinking skills and media literacy will equip students with the tools to evaluate violent views and narratives. By encouraging them to question and analyse extreme beliefs and ideologies, they are better equipped to discern manipulative tactics and to identify alternative peaceful approaches to addressing grievances. This may entail revising the education curriculum and teacher training to provide more emphasis on citizenship and civic engagement, as well as on diversity and inclusion. Given how socially constructed gender

roles and expectations may put pressure on both women and men to engage in violence, it is important that syllabuses include education on gender awareness and gender sensitivity.

Mental well being

Away from formal education, mental health and psychosocial support have a key role to play. The underlying psychological, social, and emotional factors that make people susceptible to violent narratives, need to be addressed. Psychosocial support provides a safe and supportive environment for people to express and process their emotions, including frustration, anger, or grief. For those who have experienced trauma, it can facilitate the healing process, reducing psychological distress and preventing the development of trauma-related vulnerabilities. By helping individuals develop healthy coping mechanisms and means of regulating their emotions, psychosocial support promotes well-being, reducing the likelihood of people turning to violence as an outlet for distress.

Youth engagement

As noted above, employment is not a universal panacea for preventing people from engaging in violence; however, access to economic opportunities, job stability, and social mobility can reduce feelings of frustration and marginalisation, especially among young people. Thus, providing avenues for economic empowerment through new livelihood opportunities and skills development offers alternative paths for individuals to improve their lives without resorting to violence.

In addition to the role of formal education, investing in young people's capacities, agency and leadership can play a vital role in decreasing susceptibility to violent narratives. This may include the involvement of mentors and role models who can guide and inspire young people, while helping to build their self-esteem and foster resilience. However, with many societies riddled by concerns about terrorism, young people are often stereotyped and associated with violent views and behaviours. This contributes to the marginalisation and stigmatisation of youth by framing young people as a problem to be solved and a threat to be contained, even though most young people are not involved in violence. When equipped with the relevant tools, resources and opportunities, young people can become agents of positive change.

Enabling young people to participate in decision-making processes can channel their energies and aspirations towards constructive goals. This includes providing safe spaces where young people's voices can be heard, and their concerns addressed. It can be promoted by supporting the development of youth clubs and enabling cross-cultural/religious exchanges – with an emphasis on gender-sensitivity throughout. Through such approaches young people can develop a capacity for civic engagement and leadership skills, enabling them to challenge polarisation and radicalisation and to address their grievances through peaceful means.

Governance

Stable and effective governance plays a fundamental role in building resilience to violence. This includes an independent and accountable security and justice system, which protects citizens and upholds the rule of law. This depends not just on having the necessary legislative framework, but also on having the capacity – including suitably qualified and experienced officials – to fulfil and enforce legal requirements. This extends to the many aspects of legislation which pertain to citizen's rights, such as rights to land or property. It may require reform of the security and justice sectors to incorporate international human rights standards as well as independent civilian-led oversight of security forces.

Dialogue for peace

Equally important is a community-based approach to security and conflict resolution, that allows community members to express their concerns about peace and security, and to find effective mediation for their local conflicts. Peace committees and other local structures bring community members together to identify and prioritise people's needs – paying particular attention to the different impacts of insecurity and injustice on women, girls, men and boys. They can also help build confidence between local communities, local officials and state security actors. When people perceive that their grievances and local conflicts can be addressed through peaceful

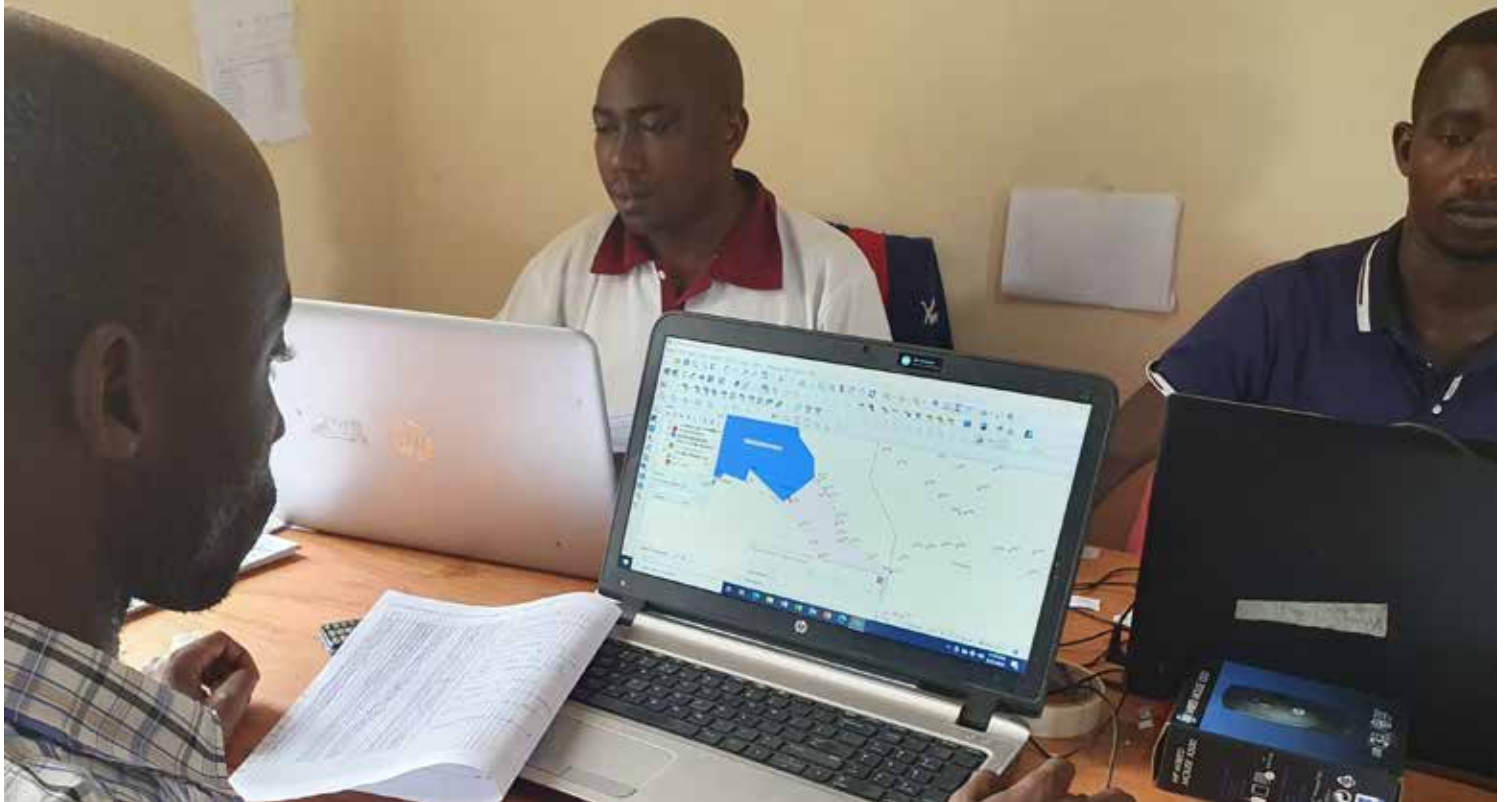
means and institutions, they are less likely to turn to violence as a means of seeking redress.

Inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue are valuable ways of developing social and cultural resilience to violent narratives. Promoting dialogue and understanding among different religious, ethnic and cultural groups fosters mutual respect and cooperation, as well as peaceful coexistence. It is particularly important for countering harmful misinterpretations of religious scriptures, and moderate faith leaders can play a key role in this. Inter-faith and inter-ethnic initiatives also challenge stereotypes and help to bridge divides. They contribute to undermining the appeal of violent narratives that rely on dividing communities along ethnic or religious lines. Similarly, providing access to counter-narratives and alternative platforms that challenge radical narratives and extremist discourses can empower individuals to question and reject violent narratives. Media literacy, online platforms, and community initiatives that amplify voices promoting peace, tolerance, and understanding have been shown to be instrumental in countering polarisation and radicalisation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by strengthening social bonds, promoting quality education, building effective governance, providing economic opportunities, encouraging interfaith dialogue, countering extremist narratives and supporting psychological resilience, it is possible to support the development of an environment that actively promotes peace, inclusion, and non-violence.





Casestudy: Land rights & peace in Burundi

Burundi's reliance on subsistence agriculture, combined with its high population density, makes land a valuable commodity. Land ownership is also closely related to Burundians' sense of identity: it is not just a source of food and livelihoods, but also an important marker of identity and status. Thus, land ownership is highly prized in Burundi. However, the combination of customary land tenure and a new formal system of land registration often causes disputes between competing claimants.

This is compounded by competing land claims between Burundian residents and returning refugees and IDPs, following decades of internal and cross-border migration. The consequence is fierce contestation of land rights, which often spills over into violence. Burundi's 2008 land reforms aimed at a comprehensive overhaul of the land rights system, including replacing customary tenure with formal registration. However, establishing a nationwide land-titling system is a vast undertaking; 15 years since the land reforms were introduced, the process of registration is not yet complete.

Since 2013, ZOA and MIPAREC (national peacebuilding organisation) have been working in Makamba province to strengthen land tenure security and improve access to land administration services. Disputes over land are a major cause of violence as Makamba borders Tanzania and DRC so is prone to disputes between residents and returning refugees. Gender inequality is also significant, as women's land rights – already less recognised and protected than those of men – tended to be further weakened by the formalisation of land tenure. ZOA's strategy therefore focuses on tenure registration, managing the needs of both returnees and residents, protecting and strengthening women's land rights, and conflict resolution.

"Land rights are not the end-goal of our project, but rather the means to an end – and that end is peace."

ZOA's land rights approach clearly targets one of the key factors causing violence in Burundi. The combination of high population density, dependence on subsistence farming, unregulated land tenure, and returning refugees/IDPs has caused a proliferation of land disputes – reportedly accounting for over half of all court cases. However, with little robust documentation regarding land rights, resolving such disputes through the courts is a complex and lengthy process. This can cause frustration and grievance between claimants, frequently leading to violence.

By strengthening land tenure security and governance in Burundi, while supporting the peaceful resolution of land-related disputes, ZOA's intervention reduces the likelihood of violence. The approach is also linked to sustainable agricultural production, thus indirectly mitigating other causes of violence, including unemployment and climate change. By raising awareness of land rights, regulations and services, ZOA also helps connect communities with the state and supports effective land governance.



Casestudy: Community based sociotherapy in the Democratic Republic of Congo

The eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has been affected by violent conflict for many decades. Much of the violence is fuelled by the intersection of ethnic identities with intense competition over natural and mineral resources. The perception that resources are not equitably shared causes distrust and division between ethnic groups. In the absence of reliable state security services to protect communities, local politicians and armed groups promote narratives claiming an existential threat if community members don't take up arms to defend themselves.

Chronic violence and insecurity in eastern DRC have led not just to high levels of death, displacement and physical destruction, but have also profoundly affected people's mental health and well-being, including their ability to relate to others. The resultant trauma and distrust undermine social cohesion within and between communities, weakening the foundations for building peace and development.

"If there is no trust between communities there can be no peace or development."

Focusing on South Kivu province in eastern DRC, ZOA and the national expert organisation Paix et Développement Durable (PDD) support the survivors of these complex and long-standing conflicts through various strategies, including community based sociotherapy (CBS). CBS is a community-led approach designed to strengthen social cohesion and recovery by enabling participants to learn and experience new constructive behaviours and ways of relating. Typically, participants from one community form into small groups of women and men to discuss topics that are of daily concern, guided by facilitators from the local community.

ZOA's work in eastern DRC addresses two of the primary causes of violence in the region: ethnicity and the psychosocial impacts of prolonged conflict and insecurity. A 2021 study showed that the CBS approach had a positive effect on the psychology of the participants, improving individual mental health and well-being. It also showed positive impacts of the CBS on communication and trust within the family, although with more mixed outcomes regarding gender attitudes and behaviours. In addition, the study explored the impact of CBS on relations between different ethnic groups, given the context of inter-ethnic distrust and polarisation. It found that CBS had led to increased social cohesion by changing negative perceptions and diminishing stereotypes. This helped improve relations between formerly polarised ethnic groups, while also supporting the inclusion of marginalised groups, such as the Pygmy community.

Given the salience of ethnic division as a driver of conflict, the trust built through the CBS approach makes a significant contribution to reducing violence. Combined with economic interventions aiming at the increase of agricultural production and income, ZOA addresses major different factors that contribute to violence.

Casestudy: Building trust between refugees & host communities in Ethiopia

Gambella Regional State (GRS) in Ethiopia borders South Sudan, so is exposed to the consequences of conflicts in the neighbouring country which have driven thousands across the border to escape violence and hunger. Over 40 per cent of refugees in Ethiopia are now housed in camps in GRS, with the number of refugees exceeding the host population. GRS itself is one of Ethiopia's poorest states, prone to disasters, and with limited social service provision and infrastructure. The rapid influx of South Sudanese refugees to an already deprived region of Ethiopia triggered a humanitarian crisis. Despite comparable vulnerability among the local Ethiopian population, aid was concentrated in refugee camps, with the needs of host communities largely neglected.

This led to competition between host and refugee communities over basic services, livelihoods, and scarce natural resources. Inter-community tensions have been exacerbated by ethnic divisions. The influx of Nuer refugees from South Sudan strained the already fragile relationship with the resident Anyuaa community, as well as between resident Nuer and Anyuaa. As increasing numbers of Nuer disrupt the ethnic balance in GRS, the Anyuaa feel threatened and resentful of the growing pressure on resources and services. These tensions often erupt into inter-personal violence, which can quickly escalate to clan or ethnic conflicts, such as cattle-raiding and revenge attacks. The violence has eroded peaceful co-existence in GRS and led to growing distrust between ethnic groups, as well as between host and refugee communities.

ZOA aims to reduce violence between communities, which are divided by ethnicity and by competition between refugees and host communities. The primary focus is on building trust between refugees and host communities, and between resident Nuer and Anyuaa. ZOA has supported the establishment and capacity-building of local infrastructure for reducing violence, including peace committees and peace promoters. Regular peace dialogues among host communities and in refugee camps have helped to identify and

address conflict issues before they turn violent. Facilitated meetings between neighbouring peace committees has enabled them to share information and concerns, reducing tensions between ethnic groups and between host and refugee communities.

“Strengthening local involvement in the peace committees helps to make peace last.”

At the same time, ZOA indirectly addresses several related causes of violence. Strengthening the capacities of local authorities to deliver services mitigates the risk that particular communities feel excluded from access to services. This includes training police in conflict sensitivity, familiarising officials with relevant legislation, and improving access to justice through mobile courts. ZOA has also helped expand livelihood opportunities by providing agricultural inputs and supporting unemployed youth to engage in agricultural activities. This helps reduce conflicts caused by competition over livelihoods and mitigates the perceived gap in support between refugees and host communities. Thus, different elements of ZOA's intervention are mutually reinforcing, all contributing to the aim of promoting conflict resolution, stability and reconciliation in GRS.





Case study: Preventing violent extremism through education in Iraq

Iraq is a fragile context characterised not just by extensive humanitarian needs but also by the less visible ravages of violence on the social fabric and on individual psychological well-being. Recent wars have led to worsening community relations, with growing divisions and distrust based on religion or nationality, or between those who fled the Islamic State (IS) and those who stayed behind. The protracted conflicts and insecurity have also normalised violence for a generation of young people.

This context provides fertile ground for narratives associated with violent extremism to take root. IS's presence may be weakened, but there remains a large cohort of school-age children traumatised by violence, who missed out on vital years of education and grew up exposed to extremist ideology, especially in IS-run schools. The education of girls and young women suffered particularly, widening the pre-existing gender learning gap. The prolonged disruption of the country's education system has had a profound psychological impact on a generation of children for whom school offered a safe learning environment.

“Under the dictatorship, differences were ignored, in post-conflict Iraq we need to learn how to live together with our differences.”

Since 2018, ZOA has partnered with UNESCO to prevent violent extremism (PVE) through education. Focusing on schools in Ninewa in the north of Iraq and Al Anbar in the east, the project involves a range of educational stakeholders, including teachers, school principals, student leaders, local education officials and parents. ZOA developed a curriculum on PVE through Education (PVE-E) which promotes understanding and mitigation of thoughts and behaviour patterns that may lead to violent extremism. Training guides were developed for the different stakeholder groups, with all materials anchored in the principle of gender equality and the right to education for all.

ZOA has now trained thousands of parents and hundreds of teachers in Iraq to understand the roots of violent extremism and to equip them with skills and approaches to help students feel safe, included and supported. Since ZOA started this PVE-E approach, Iraqi teachers observed that their pupils have become calmer and more in control. They also experienced changes in their own mindsets, including greater awareness of gender equality and the use of corporal punishment. Teachers learned how to deal with students in a more supportive way, showing respect, encouragement and appreciation, rather than insults and punishment. ZOA also developed and implemented a community cohesion curriculum and trained two thousand youths and adults in cultivating critical thinking, embracing pluralistic perspectives, and fostering positive social attitudes. The programme encouraged participants to reflect on their thoughts, actions, and judgments, thus building resilience to violent behaviour.

These outcomes suggest that by supporting the creation of safe learning environments and positive learning experiences, students are less likely to develop negative coping mechanisms that may lead to violent behaviour. The PVE-E approach thus reduces the likelihood that school students will be attracted to extremist narratives and violent ideologies. Moreover, by providing space for children from diverse communities to discuss their differences, it helps restore trust between polarised communities.

Casestudy: An integrated approach to peace & resilience in South Sudan

ZOA has been working in Bor South and Pibor in South Sudan's Jonglei State since 2012. Years of violence and insecurity in this area have led to profound distrust between social groups, fuelling inter-community conflicts. Violence against women and girls is also widespread, rooted in traditional social customs and practices. Forced marriages and elopements are often the catalyst for violence.

With limited education and few livelihood opportunities, young men see little prospect of achieving a better future through peaceful means. They traditionally play a key role in maintaining security in their communities, and are at the forefront of conflicts with neighbouring villages. As most communities in Bor South are cattle-keepers, these conflicts are often related to cattle-theft and kidnappings. The absence of effective rule of law and accountability for such crimes has entrenched a culture of revenge attacks. Furthermore, South Sudan's long history of warfare means that firearms are widespread and readily accessible, so attacks rapidly escalate and become fatal. Meanwhile, climate change has exacerbated food insecurity through extreme weather events, with severe floods in recent years increasing competition for scarce natural resources.

ZOA has adopted a multi-sectoral approach to building peace and resilience in Bor. This combines support for local peace committees, food security, WASH, and community based sociotherapy. The village-level peace committees bring together diverse community members, including women's and youth representatives, church leaders, and elders, to mediate conflicts, or to refer to other institutions if needed. ZOA also provides capacity-building to peace committees on key drivers of local conflict, such as forced marriages, cattle-raiding and inter-communal violence. The peace committees help reduce violence by providing a safe space for communities to

identify and address potential conflicts before they turn violent. The peace committee facilitators report increased confidence within and between different communities, which has led to improved relations and a reduction in incidents of violence.

"The more you have to lose, the more you will not engage in conflict"

The other elements of the ZOA approach also contribute to reducing the causes of violence. For instance, to raise awareness about gender-based violence and promote gender equality, ZOA supports the establishment of girl clubs in schools and training of girl-club matrons. This helps build confidence among young girls and women, and to challenge gender stereotypes. By supporting farmers to produce basic food items, ZOA has strengthened local capacities to mitigate the impacts of climate shocks and natural disasters, which could otherwise lead to violent competition for scarce resources. Meanwhile, by increasing income-generating opportunities and providing skills training for youth, they are less likely to feel economically excluded and to resort to violence as their only means of securing a better future. This demonstrates the value of an integrated approach, with interventions in a variety of sectors - all contributing to the overarching goal of peace and resilience.



4. Analysis of ZOA's approach

Violence presents a profound challenge to ZOA's mission of supporting relief and recovery, with 59 per cent of the world's 'extreme poor' projected to be living in countries affected by fragility, conflict and violence by 2030. **This paper highlights that multiple, inter-linked factors cause people to engage in violence. Therefore, ZOA should adopt a multi-faceted and joined-up approach to address this challenge.** In line with this finding, ZOA's strategic plan 2023 - 2026 indicates that ZOA is a **'peace nexus organisation with an integrated approach'**, underlining the deliberate choice for such a strategy. This multi-faceted and joined-up approach is already evident in the five ZOA country case studies that were reviewed in this paper. The project design reflects the linkages between sectors – for instance, how expanding livelihood opportunities can complement trust building among divided communities – and how different strands of an intervention can be mutually reinforcing, all contributing towards the overarching goal of peace and resilience: the peace nexus. While the paper focuses in some cases on single sectors of ZOA's work in a particular country, it is important to note that these do not represent the totality of ZOA's interventions in that context.

Looking at the different factors contributing to the engagement in violence - as described in section 2- and ZOA's work on peacebuilding - as reflected in the case studies and other work-, ZOA mainly addresses several factors. These are factors related to

livelihoods, sociocultural factors - especially education, ethnicity and psychological elements-, and gender. ZOA plans to invest more in climate resilience and the role of religion in conflict and peace, which has so far received less attention. Political exclusion and poor governance have often been outside the scope of ZOA's work, as well as lobby and advocacy towards (inter)national government stakeholders.

Adopting the integrated peace nexus approach does not imply that ZOA should work in all sectors and at all levels. This would lead to **high risks of spreading itself too thin and compromising quality.** While ZOA has built up strong capacity and expertise in various sectors – land rights and community based sociotherapy, for example – there may be other intervention areas where it does not currently have the same capacity and expertise, for example international lobby or political governance. Therefore, ZOA should be clear about the sectors in which the organisation has a comparative advantage, and then identify which actors – whether CBOs, national NGOs, international NGOs or agencies – have a comparative advantage in other areas. Subsequently, partnerships can be developed accordingly.

The triple nexus approach (and the derived peace nexus approach) offers a useful framework for ensuring this integrated programming across humanitarian, development and peacebuilding dimensions,





but does not imply that a single organisation should operate across all the associated sectors. However, this way of working does require **multisectoral analysis and Monitoring & Evaluation focusing on the contribution of all ZOA's work to peace - taking the complexities into account.** It asks ZOA to break down silos between different sectors within the organisation to increase complementarity. Where ZOA works with other organisations, with specific fields of expertise, it is important to create, discuss and optimise synergies, to have an effective and sustainable peace effect.

There is growing understanding that prolonged exposure to fear, insecurity and violence has profound psychological impacts. It makes people more susceptible to polarisation, radicalisation and to engagement in violence. Addressing psychological factors at both individual and community levels is thus an essential foundation for building peace and resilience. ZOA's pioneering, and still evolving, practice of community based sociotherapy (CBS) could provide a valuable resource and guidance for other organisations seeking to develop and embed this sort of approach in their work. There is also increasing recognition at the policy level of the influence that psychological and psychosocial factors have on making people susceptible to violence. However, there has not yet been a commensurate increase in resources allocated to this area of work.

ZOA has a strong commitment to a community-based approach. This bottom-up approach of working inclusively with a range of community members to build their ownership of projects is essential for laying the foundations for peace and resilience. The emphasis in the case studies reviewed on local ownership and leadership gives communities more agency and influence over decisions that affect their lives. This reduces reliance on state authorities, often perceived as absent or ineffective, and diminishes the risk of political exclusion. However, sustainable peace is hard to build without considering the roles and responsibilities of local authorities. ZOA's decision to include local authorities (both traditional and official) in certain peace dialogue activities, and to provide training and equipment to relevant officials in Ethiopia and Burundi, for instance, demonstrates that it is aware of and responsive to the need to engage local authorities.

Even so, **whatever is achieved at the community-level, will be constrained at best and undermined at worst by the national-level governance and socio-economic context.** In its Theory of Change, ZOA itself acknowledges that "conflict ... (has) causes and dimensions that go beyond the (community) level". And it is certainly the case that a community-based approach is unlikely to be sufficient for addressing structural violence and achieving lasting conflict transformation. Communities may be excluded from the national political process or be socio-economically marginalised; they may suffer from poor access to basic services or from ineffective and abusive state security and justice provision. All these factors have the potential to undermine peace and resilience.

Equally, the broader international context will shape what is achievable at the community-level; whether that be in relation to the spill-over effects of conflicts in neighbouring countries, or hard security responses to 'terrorism'. **Therefore, to optimise the value of ZOA's work, a bottom-up approach needs to meet a top-down approach.** In other words, programming at the community-level should be complemented by suitably aligned interventions at national and international levels, as these significantly shape the context for peacebuilding and may otherwise undermine project achievements. **This is not to suggest that ZOA itself should directly intervene at all these levels. It has established a strong track record for its work at the community level and this may be where its comparative advantage lies.** Again, it is instead a question of ZOA identifying which other actors have a comparative advantage in areas such as policy dialogue and advocacy at national and international levels. Then, ZOA could develop strategic partnerships with them.

Addressing the many factors that give rise to violence is **not a 'quick fix', and outcomes are unlikely to emerge in the short-term.** This sort of work requires sustained engagement and investment, and a realistic ambition about what can be achieved and what lies outside ZOA's sphere of influence. This paper has underlined the value of ZOA's multi-faceted and joined-up approaches to peacebuilding. Long term commitment, willingness to learn from successes and mistakes, and openness to cooperate with local and international actors can make ZOA's peacebuilding work even more effective in the future.

5. Recommendations

To ZOA and peer organisations

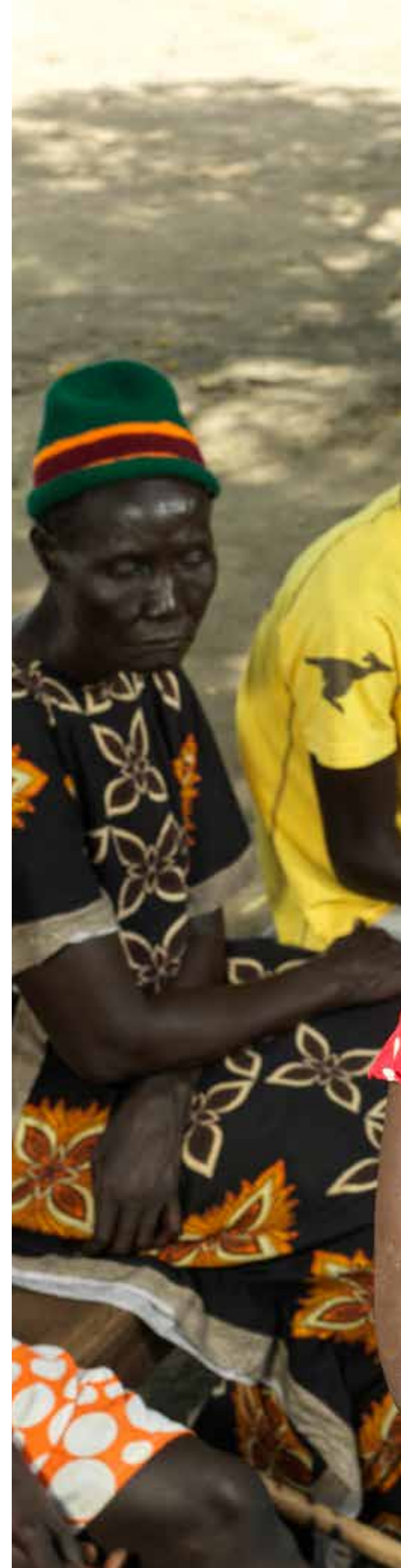
- Undertake a multi-sectoral conflict analysis identifying the different factors leading up to conflict in a specific context. This should be followed by mapping all relevant humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors and their strengths to identify where and how ZOA and others should focus their operations based on their comparative sectoral strengths.
- Develop, together with other organisations bringing in different expertise, a vertically integrated approach – comprising community-level, national and international engagement - to complement the horizontally integrated multi-sectoral programming approach.
- Engage local government authorities in relevant peacebuilding activities and strengthen their capacities to fulfil their role in addressing the causes of violence.
- Build capacities and expertise to address psychological and psychosocial causes of violence; for instance, through a community based sociotherapy approach.

To policy makers and donors

- Given the myriad inter-linked factors that cause people to engage in violence, adopt triple nexus (and specifically peace nexus) as the central framework for ensuring that humanitarian, development and peacebuilding aid and interventions are joined-up and mutually reinforcing.
- Provide long-term funding for multi sectoral peacebuilding to address the deep-rooted and complex web of factors that cause people to engage in violence. Remove siloed funding streams which prevents the funding of these 'peace nexus' programmes.
- Invest in policy dialogue with national governments about their responsibilities to provide justice and security, and to create an enabling environment for political inclusion and civic space. Align these diplomatic efforts with local peacebuilding interventions of (inter)national NGOs.
- Increase investment in mental health and psychosocial support, and in education, as the essential foundation for reducing the appeal of violent narratives and for building peace and resilience.

To all

- Maintain and expand an integrated multi-sectoral programming approach to address the diverse causes of violence through a multi-faceted and mutually reinforcing strategy. Peace nexus helps to bring focus in the multi-sectoral programming: how to optimise the contribution of the different sectors to peace?
- Stay away from linear simplified pathways, as engagement in violence is rarely a simple 'choice'. Generally, many contributory factors are leading up to the decision to engage in violence.
- Invest in impact research of multi-sectoral peace nexus programming and underpinning Theory of Change to learn how to effectively address the causes of violence in specific contexts. Evaluations at the end of interventions but also several years later, are crucial to learn for future programming.





MAIN CONSULTED DOCUMENTS

UNDP (2023) Journey to extremism in Africa, Pathways to recruitment and disengagement

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Khan, S. et al. (2015). Social exclusion: topic guide. Revised edition. Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham.

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ZOA (2021) The effect of community based sociotherapy in Kalehe, DR Congo, research paper

ZOA (2022) Towards peace and resilience, ZOA Strategic Plan 2023-2026

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from relief to recovery

