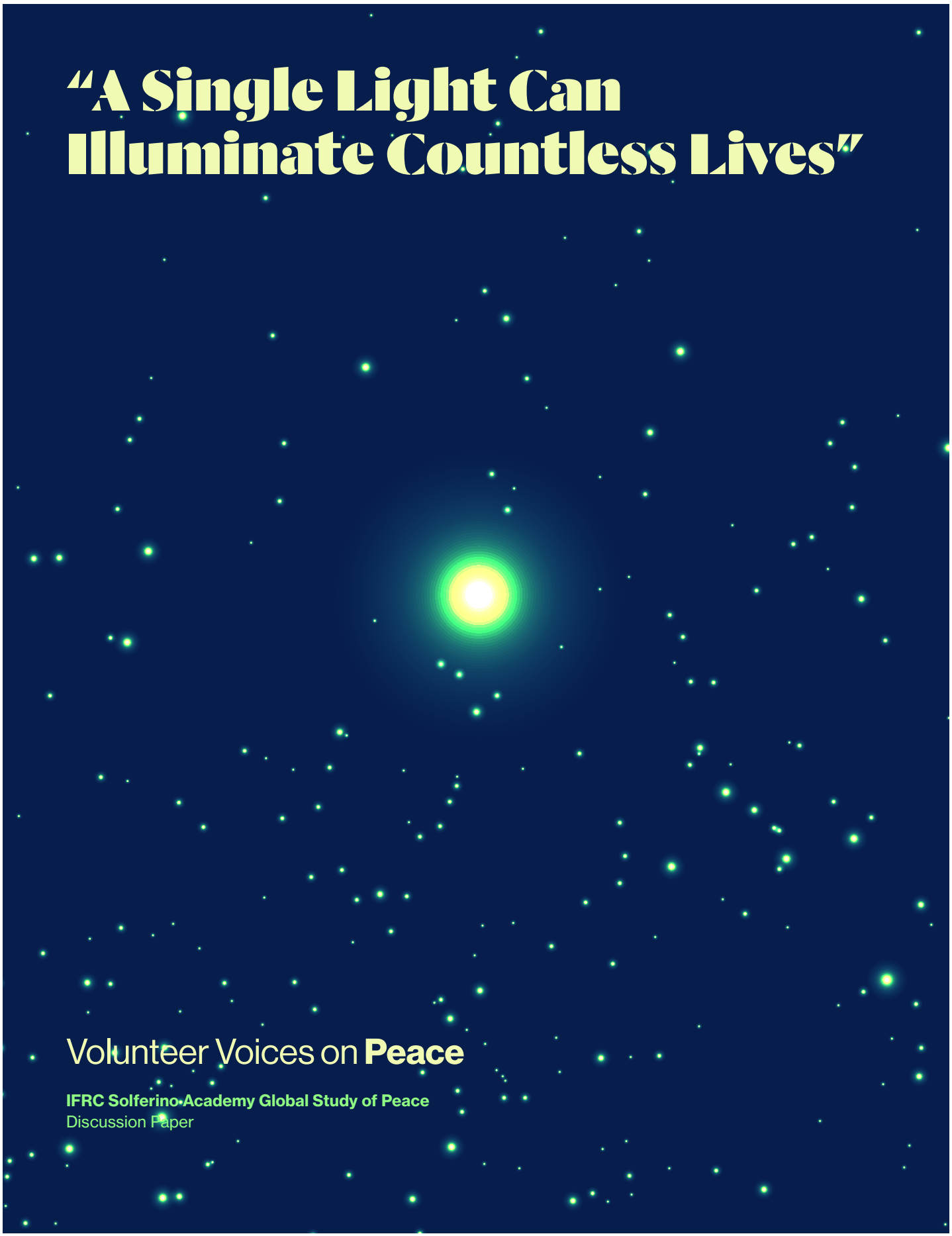
“A Single Light Can Illuminate Countless Lives”



Volunteer Voices on **Peace**

IFRC Solferino Academy Global Study of Peace
Discussion Paper





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The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the IFRC, its Secretariat, or its member National Societies.

Summary for leaders

The research

- From May to November 2026 the IFRC Solferino Academy ran the IFRC Network’s largest ever consultation on peace. More than 3,700 Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers and staff in 109 countries scored peace in their own communities, ranking it on ten dimensions. More than 2,200 wrote about it in their own words, sharing reflections in 16 languages.
- It is evident that many of the respondents live and work in some of the most challenging conditions on earth: where peace is broken, and where, sometimes, it is made. Every single day, they support the living, carry the injured, bury the victims of epidemics, respond to floods, storms and earthquakes and cross front lines of conflict. All this is despite facing intolerable challenges themselves - including coming under attack and threat in breach of international law. Their contributions to this study therefore, provide a unique and credible perspective with which to help inform strategy and policy.
- Of those who described the state of peace in their own community, nine out of ten said it was tense, fragile or in crisis. The volunteer rankings in general, align with global indices including the Fragile States Index and the Global Peace Index across countries.
- Two Volunteer think-tanks, 30 volunteers and staff from 14 National Societies, tested the findings and shaped the four futures and the asks in this paper.

What was found

- Peace is an ecosystem that spans levels: the person and the home; the community; livelihoods and resources; government, law and institutions; land, nature and weather; and the wider region and world. Poverty and joblessness are the most cited cause of tension. Half of all respondents score their community’s economic security at 2 or below on a five-point scale. It is the lowest scored part of peace in four of the five regions.
- Young people are named as the key actors for peace in their communities, and as the people with the least say in the decisions that shape them. Women hold peace together at home and in the community, and are also the most exposed when it breaks, whether due to violence in the home or in society.
- The levels act on each other in every direction. A fracture at one level spreads to the others. Repairs and mends at one level can also move to influence other levels.

- Red Cross Red Crescent volunteers and staff work to make peace every day. They give psychosocial support after violence, bring neighbours into dialogue, broker between herders and farmers and between hosts and migrants, work on water, land and jobs, and teach young people to settle disputes. This is peacemaking work of considerable depth and reach.

- Taken as a whole, the Network has a presence for peace at every level of the ecosystem of peace, in many countries around the world. But most of its current work is insufficiently funded, counted and connected, and could be significantly strengthened with increased attention, and in particular a sustained, long term focus and resources allocation.

Four futures to 2030

In October 2026, two Volunteer Think-Tanks on Peace were established to test and validate findings, to reflect on the possible futures of peace for the Network, and to craft recommendations. They also drafted a Letter for Peace from the Volunteers (see Box 1)

- **Off-grid** Peace work goes on every day, with no clear position and no investment behind it. No one outside the Network knows it is happening.

- **Power cut** A position is adopted, in strategies and speeches, and nothing resources it.

- **Short circuit** Peace work is taken up fast and directly, without a clear position, and puts neutrality, access and trust at risk.

- **Live connection** A principled Network position with investment behind it: staff, programme support, technical capacity, a seat for young people. Existing efforts are joined up.

The Volunteer Think-Tank’s ask was for leaders to help move the Network from where they see it today, between Off-grid and Power cut, to Live connection. This requires defining a position on what peace means for the Network, saying what it will and will not do; ensuring sustained resources and attention for peace within existing programmes; and building skills, learning and inclusion for young people, women and others to ensure peace work is designed and delivered with those most affected at the centre.

Box 1

A Letter for Peace from the Volunteers

Where we live, peace is living with dignity and safety, in balance with each other and with nature, and being able to disagree without fear. It is not having to hide your name or where your grandparents came from when elections come. It is what everyone wants, and in many of our countries it is hard to have.

As volunteers, staff and associates, we already build peace every day, funded or not. We bring people into dialogue. We give psychosocial support and trauma care after violence. We mediate at the community level. We teach young people the skills to resolve conflict. We work with elders and community leaders on water, pasture and jobs.

We ask the leaders of the IFRC network to make this work permanent and sustainable. Put psychosocial support, youth peace education and community dialogue into core operations with lasting funding. Train volunteers and staff in conflict sensitivity so that every programme protects peace. Connect peace with livelihoods, mental health and protection. Involve volunteers when relevant policies are written. Fund and guide youth-led initiatives that build on the wisdom of our own communities and assess how that support is deployed. Build network-wide dialogue, learning and evidence on peace.

We ask those responsible for the wider conditions of peace to act on what humanitarian work can never alone fix: poverty, unemployment, unequal access to rights and justice, misinformation and competition over resources. Listen to the people who live with the consequences. Involve young people in the decisions. Protect the independent, impartial humanitarian space that lets us serve everyone, regardless of who they are or how they are impacted by conflict.

From Participants of the Volunteer Think-Tanks on Peace, 9 October 2026.

> “Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.”
>
> Dr Martin Luther King Jr.

1 Introduction

A young man finishes school and there is no work. He hangs around with other young people without work in the usual places. Before an upcoming election, some of them are recruited and paid to cause trouble in certain neighbourhoods. 100 shillings before, 100 after, straight to their phones. The poll violence is met with police brutality. After the election nobody asks him or any young people, what should happen next. Things feel worse than they were before. The next election, it all starts again.

> **Lack of employment to young people has led to political radicalization where politicians pay young people to cause violence. There is no trust between police and young people in my community.”**

The seasonal rains fail. There is not enough water or pasture. Herders across the region start to move their animals onto other people’s land. There are raids, people are killed. Then the revenge for the raids creates a path with no seeming end. The next dry season, it gets worse.

> **Being a pastoralist community, we depend entirely on livestock. Lack of water and pasture bring conflict between communities.”**

Young men with nothing to do are recruited by armed groups across the border. There are attacks. The blame falls on the villages the recruits came from. Whole communities and ethnic groups get blamed and stigmatised. Opportunities for decent work fall even further. The next recruiter who arrives from across the border finds the youth angrier, more frustrated, and easier to recruit.

> **Juvenile gangs in the area make the tension very high. A high number of young people are joining [violent] groups in the neighbouring countries.”**

Each of these stories was shared by Kenyan volunteer respondents to the Global Study on Peace, when asked to share examples of how peace gets harmed in the communities where they live and work.

The Volunteer Think-Tanks on Peace brought together people from 14 countries around the world all of whom recognised the same dynamics in their own communities. These patterns are pervasive and they recur year after year.

It would be easy to be disheartened upon reading this. But respondents also shared examples of how peace gets made or mended, often in the same places and by the same people.

> **"The community leaders call for a community meeting twice a month to try and resolve those burning issues. During those meetings people can share their different ideas on how to keep peace in our community."**
>
> Volunteer, **Eswatini**

> **"Where conflict and division exist, a football pitch or netball court can become neutral ground for trust."**
>
> Volunteer, **Zambia**

> **"Helping people during disasters and first aid training builds trust. When we work as a team without bias, community tension reduces."**
>
> Volunteer, **Bangladesh**

Through Limitless, 10,000 young volunteers from 152 National Societies have submitted thousands of project ideas that address these peace-harming dynamics directly. They do so by bringing in light instead of darkness, hope instead of hate, dialogue instead of defiance. One, in Kenya for example, addresses the dynamics above directly, putting young people's evidence, data and insight in front of county leaders to influence decision making (see section 3.4 for more details).

This Discussion Paper sets out these and other key findings of the first Global Study on Peace piloted by the IFRC Solferino Academy, for consideration by leaders across the Network and beyond. In 2026 the Academy asked volunteers and staff around the world what peace looks like where they live, what makes it, what breaks it and what they do about it.

More than 3,700 people in 109 countries answered.[1] All of them scored peace in their own communities, ranking it on ten dimensions, and more than 2,200 wrote about it in their own words, sharing reflections in sixteen languages.

Their answers were combined with a synthesis of more than 700 published studies on peace work. Two think-tanks of volunteers and staff from fourteen countries then tested the findings, confirmed some, challenged and improved others, and developed

and sharpened the recommendations. The think-tank participants are co-authors of this paper, alongside IFRC Solferino Academy staff, and are credited on the copyright page.

The Letter from the Volunteer Think-Tank on Peace above sets out what peace means where volunteers live, what they already do to build it, and what they ask of the Network's leaders and of those responsible for the wider conditions of peace. The rest of this paper sets out the context and evidence supporting their arguments and their asks.

2 The Global and Institutional Context for Peace

There are more armed conflicts in the world today than at any time since the Second World War. In 2024 researchers counted 61 state-based conflicts, the highest number since records began in 1946, and eleven of them were full-scale wars.[2] In Afghanistan, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Gaza, Myanmar and Ukraine, the toll of war is overwhelming. More than twenty conflicts have lasted over two decades. Whole generations of young people today have never known peace.[3]

Over 200 million people live in areas controlled by non-state armed groups.[4] More than 120 million people have been forced from their homes, the highest number ever recorded.[5] These numbers show the scale of what peace work now faces.

The institutions built to negotiate and sustain peace have struggled to deliver it in recent years, with few exceptions. Public confidence in them has weakened in many countries. Comprehensive peace agreements negotiated between warring parties with mediating governments,[6] once seen as the route to durable peace, are now rarely attempted. In the 1970s one in four conflicts ended in a negotiated peace agreement. In the 2010s it was one in twenty-five.[7] Modern conflicts no longer end in clearcut victories - instead many now drag on without resolution.

Conflict parties and mediators settle for short-term arrangements instead of agendas that address the root causes of conflict, making difficult trade-offs between urgency and depth. Until the root causes are addressed, however, new cycles of violence will keep emerging, and will fall hardest on the most vulnerable communities.

The volunteers and staff of the Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies have worked with communities experiencing war and conflict around the world for more than 160 years. The Movement's positions on peace were set out at the World Red Cross and Red Crescent Conferences on Peace in 1975 and 1984.[8]

These rest on the contribution of humanitarian work; on the Fundamental Principles, especially humanity; on international humanitarian law; and on humanitarian education. To protect its independence and neutrality, the Network has avoided direct involvement in mediation between the parties to a conflict. This has also led to some caution and risk aversion about any work on peace.

In October 2024, the Council of Delegates returned to the issue. Its resolution, "Reaffirming the role of the Movement as a factor of peace", recalled the motto *per humanitatem ad pacem*, ("through humanity to peace"), and described lasting peace as a dynamic process of cooperation among all states and peoples.[9]

It focused the Movement's contribution on the tools it already has, and asked National Societies to work with communities to design programmes, to give priority to volunteer- and youth-led work, to train volunteers and staff in non-violent communication, mediation and dialogue facilitation, to strengthen understanding of how neutral and impartial action contributes to peace, and to build the evidence on what works.

It also asked each part of the Movement to explore its contribution to peace. Building on Limitless Peace, the Global Study and this paper are part of IFRC's response. Box 2 sets out these and some of the initiatives underway across the Network.

Box 2

Peace work across the IFRC Network

Generation Peace is the IFRC's framework for peace commitments with young people at the centre.

Limitless for Peace is a two-year innovation and leadership programme through which young volunteers from across the Network design and test peace projects in their own contexts. The Limitless for peace training programme had over 10,000 participants and provided the platform for this pilot Global Study on Peace.

Light in the Darkness is a two-year campaign to build a culture of peace across National Societies, with regular activities led by young people, including facilitated conversations on peace between generations.

The Global Peace Network is an emerging effort to connect National Societies working on peace, in all contexts from relative calm to active conflict, and to share tools and practice.

A youth-led peace coalition is being built with external youth and peacebuilding partners, to support young people as peacemakers in their communities through daily practice, skills in dialogue and conflict resolution, and youth-led action.

Across **191 National Societies**, volunteers and leaders already run peace work of their own, mostly under other names: dialogue, social cohesion, reconciliation, protection.

3 What is peace? What harms and heals it?

3.1 Overview of Volunteer peace rankings

In 2026 the IFRC Solferino Academy ran the Network's largest consultation on peace to date. It asked volunteers and staff what peace looks like where they live, what harms it, what heals it, and what they already do to strengthen it.

The survey was open from May to November 2026. It received more than 3,700 responses from 109 countries, in every region where the IFRC works.

Respondents scored their own communities on ten dimensions of peace: physical safety; social cohesion; economic security; inclusion, equality and dignity; participation and leadership; care, protection and support; cultural respect and expression; environmental stability; education and awareness; and dialogue and mutual understanding.

Figure 1 below shows the average score for each of these dimensions, while Box 3 explains how the volunteer scores correlate with existing global indices of peace and fragility.

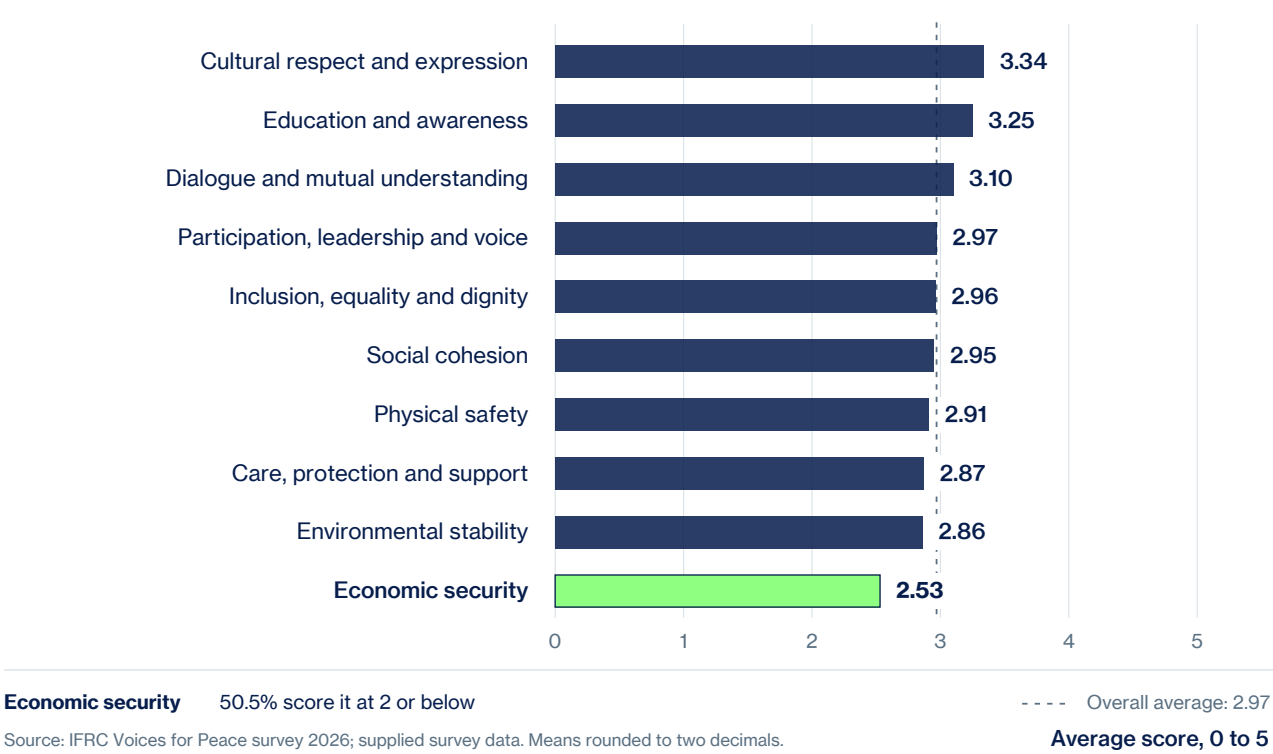


Figure 1 **Average score on each of the ten dimensions, all respondents.**

Perhaps predictably, no dimension was scored especially well. The average across all ten is just under 3 on a scale of 1 to 5. Cultural respect and expression scores highest at 3.3, followed by education and awareness at 3.2 and dialogue and mutual understanding at 3.1. Physical safety is 2.9. Care, protection and support, and environmental stability come next lowest, both below 2.9. Economic security is the lowest at 2.5, and half of all respondents score it at 2 or below. It is also the lowest scored dimension in four of the five regions.

It is noteworthy that the dimensions that depend on how people treat each other score higher than the dimensions that depend on money, services and the state, in all regions.

The scores also differ based on standing within communities. Respondents who see themselves as having a lower standing than others where they live give an average of 2.5 across the ten dimensions. Those who see themselves as having a higher standing give an average of 3.4. Peace, like vulnerability, appears to be unequally distributed.

> **Peace is at risk because of such palpable segregation; there are people with everything and many with nothing.”**

Volunteer, **Chile**

> **Rising far-right sentiment, racialised hostility, and political scapegoating of migrants are fracturing social trust. Peace here isn’t absent but it’s increasingly conditional on who you are.”**

Staff member, **United Kingdom**

Box 3

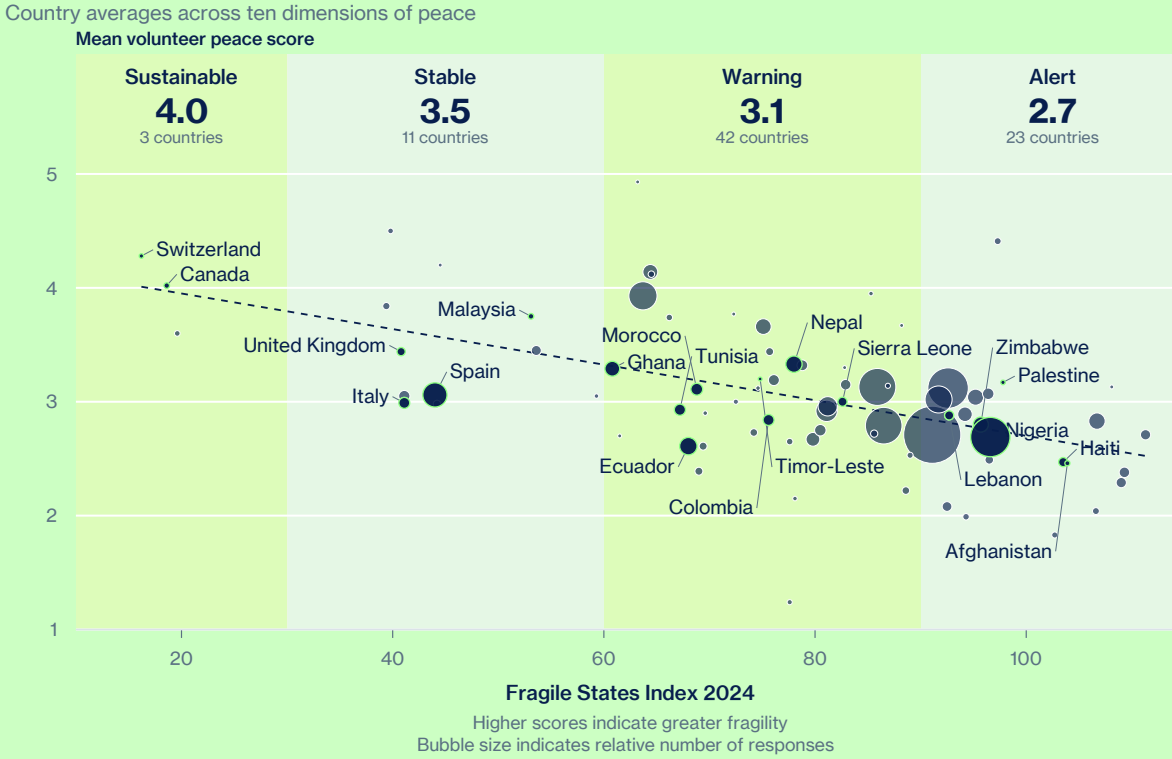
How robust are volunteer scores on peace?

Volunteers' country averages were compared with two global indices, the Fragile States Index 2024[10] and the Global Peace Index 2026[11]. The volunteer scores track well with both. Specifically, countries that are ranked in the two indices as more fragile or less peaceful also consistently get lower scores from volunteers living in those countries.

Figure 2 shows the pattern. Volunteers in countries the Fragile States Index rates as sustainable give an average of 4.0. In stable countries it is 3.5, in the warning category 3.1, and in countries on alert 2.7. While detailed statistical analysis and proofs are beyond the intention and scope of this first study, this indicates the broader validity of the volunteer-generated dataset and creates a useful starting point for future iterations of the Global Study.

Volunteer peace scores and national fragility

Country averages across ten dimensions of peace



Spearman correlation **−0.52**

Source: IFRC Voices for Peace survey; supplied country table. 79 countries; 3,421 responses.

Figure 2 **Volunteer scores and the Fragile States Index, 79 countries.**

3.2 Overview of volunteer peace reflections

While the rankings above show how volunteers score peace, they also explained how they experience it daily. More than 2,200 respondents wrote about peace in their own words, in 16 languages: what it looks like where they live, what harms it, what heals it, and what they do about it.

Half the respondents described peace as it is where they live: its strengths and its weaknesses. Half described the peace they wanted to see: their hopes and dreams of peace in their lives, and in the lives of the communities they served.

Two Volunteer Think-Tanks, comprising 30 volunteers and staff from 14 National Societies, met in October 2026 to test both the rankings and the reflections. They confirmed the different rankings, the different levels of peace, how peace is made and harmed. They added new considerations at the regional and global level, sharpened the framing of peace, and refined the potential future directions for the Network. They also worked to craft the Letter on Peace that opens this paper.

Figure 3 shows the themes in volunteers' statements, ranked by how often they appear. Reading down the list, the themes fall into groups.

Living in fear, peace starting in the person, violence at home, drugs and alcohol, stress and trauma, and the memory of war are **about the person and the home**.

Dialogue and listening, unity, education, misunderstanding and mistrust, divisions of tribe, faith and party, small everyday acts of respect, and elders settling disputes are all about **what happens between people in a community**.

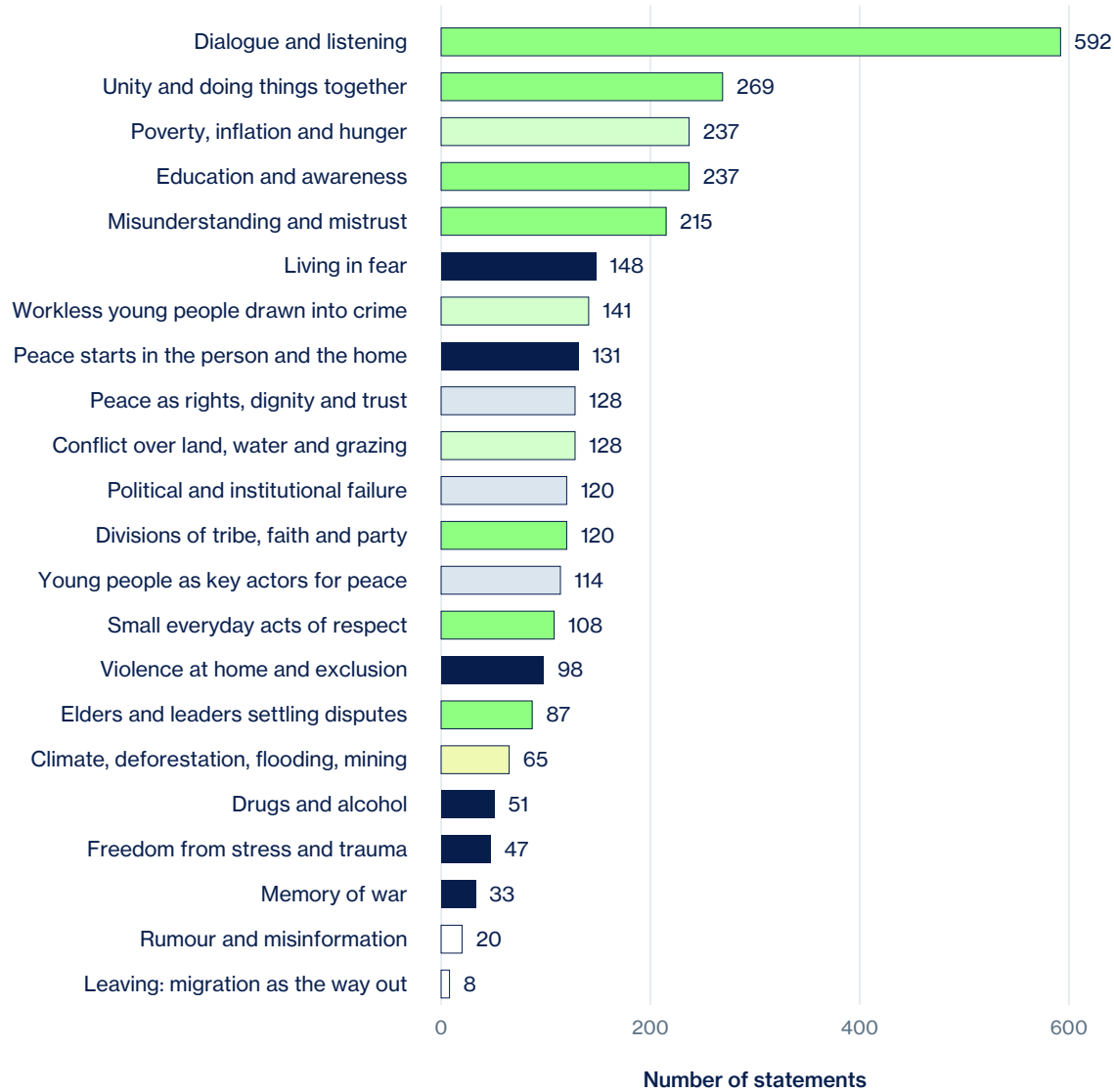
Poverty, workless young people, and conflict over land, water and grazing are about **how people make a living**.

Political failure, rights and dignity, and young people's place in decisions are **about government, law and institutions**.

Climate, deforestation, flooding and mining are **about the land, weather and climate**. Rumour, misinformation, migration go beyond national boundaries to **the regional and global context**.

What volunteers wrote about

Statements by theme · 2,200 statements from 86 countries



Source: IFRC Voices for Peace survey 2026; coded analytical matrix. Statements may carry multiple themes.
Colour identifies level, not whether a statement describes harm or healing.

Figure 3 **What volunteers wrote about: statements by theme, 2,200 statements from 86 countries, categorised by level of peace. A statement can relate to more than one theme.**

3.3 Peace is a system

The volunteer reflections, rankings and think-tanks describe peace as a system made up of different levels. It begins in the person and the home. It is made or lost in the community. It relies on adequate work, food, land and water. It is held in place or undermined by government, law and institutions. It is stressed by the state of the land, weather and climate change. And it is shaped by what happens in the wider region and globally.

Below each of these levels is described in turn, in the volunteers' words: what peace looks like, what harms it, and what heals it.

The person and the home. Peace begins inside oneself, in one's mind and body, and then at home. "The first conflict is not with weapons, but at home," wrote a volunteer in Burundi.

What harms peace most is violence inside the house, neglect, the stress and untreated trauma that follow war and disaster, and the fear that becomes ordinary where crises never end: children in Cameroon who can tell gunfire from thunder, volunteers in northern Nigeria who leave each morning praying to come home safe.

Where crises never end, trauma is endured more than it is spoken about.

> **Peace [here] is holding your breath. Ghost towns, IEDs, bullets emptying... streets. We've buried too many and normalised trauma**

Volunteer, **Cameroon**

Women and girls are the most exposed when peace fails at home, and they are also the people most often named as holding it together.

What heals peace at this level is care: psychosocial support, someone present at the moment of need, and the daily conduct of the people in the home.

The community. Peace is made daily, through dialogue, listening and small acts of respect. Volunteers treat tension as a normal part of community life and define peace as being heard, even in disagreement.

Elders, religious leaders, mothers and grandmothers are the people who sit disputes down; land meetings twice a month in Eswatini, a gang truce brokered in Sierra Leone, a boundary settled in Malawi.

> **Peace is not the absence of disagreement. A community without disagreement is a community where no one dares to say what they think. True peace is the ability to disagree without destroying each other."**

Volunteer, **Togo**

> **To live in peace we do not need to think alike, we just need to respect each other a little more. Tensions shrink when we stop seeing our neighbour as an enemy and start to talk."**

Volunteer, **Ecuador**

What harms peace is rumour running ahead of the truth, leaders who seek power by dividing by tribe, faith or party, and those same peace-strengthening community structures when they are stretched beyond what they can cope with.

What heals it is the habit of repair: a greeting, a thank you, a football pitch that becomes neutral ground, a meeting called before the dispute becomes a feud.

Education, awareness and mediation are among the most consistently named ways of making peace.

> **In a polarised world it is important to build critical awareness and resilience together, and to learn to build a peaceful, welcoming and tolerant coexistence."**

Volunteer, **Spain**

Volunteers are also clear on what these things cannot do: they cannot overcome hunger, poverty or joblessness.

Livelihoods and resources. "Peace begins on the plate," wrote a volunteer in Niger.

As already noted, poverty and joblessness are the most cited cause of tension, and economic security is the lowest scored of the ten dimensions, with half of all respondents scoring it at 2 or below.

What harms peace here is the path volunteers describe again and again: no income, then theft, drugs, a gang, a politician's payroll; stealing and cattle raids in order to survive.

These personal experiences are shaped by national realities: by one Ugandan volunteer's count, there were 700,000 graduates a year for 80,000 formal jobs.

What heals peace is work, fair access to land and water, and skills. Volunteers describe alternative income sources such as beekeeping, enterprise training and rainwater harvesting as peace work. Work for young people is also named across many countries and all regions as 'peace work for the future'.

> **Peace begins with the availability of a decent life for the individual, because most conflicts happen in poor areas due to the pressures of life that lead to tension."**

Staff member, **Iraq**

Government, law and institutions. Governments and institutions can hold peace in place. But volunteers describe them more often as absent, failing, or the threat itself: corruption, jobs handed out by connection, laws unenforced, courts too slow, mob justice filling the gap, and elections that reopen old divisions.

This matches the wider fall in trust in governments and public institutions that volunteers describe in their own countries.

Young people are named as key actors for peace, but also as the people with the least say in the decisions that affect them.

What heals peace here are authorities that show up: a council that deals with waste before a dispute over rubbish becomes a feud, police the young can trust, courts that deliver on time.

But this is not a given. Many volunteers say they will build peace with or without the state.

> **Peace is not only the absence of violence, but also that our rights are fulfilled."**

Volunteer, **Ecuador**

Land, nature and weather. Failed rains, floods, deforestation and mining, and the displacement they drive, harm peace.

Many respondents described the chain of events: drought to pasture to raiding in Somalia and Kenya, failed yields to hunger to violence at home in Uganda, blocked drains to floods to feuds between neighbours in Togo. "Power saws create conflicts every day in the forest reserves," wrote a volunteer in Kenya.

What heals peace is fair access to water and other resources, warnings and preparations before the rains fail, and people caring for the land and natural resources together.

> **In Somali agro-pastoral communities, peace is essential for sharing water, grazing land, and livelihoods. Dialogue, respect, and cooperation help prevent conflicts and strengthen resilience during droughts and other challenges.”**

Volunteer, **Somalia**

The wider region and world. Peace in one place depends on conditions far beyond it.

Young people without work in one country are recruited across a border and become a problem for a region. A rumour started on a platform run from another continent turns neighbours against each other.

When diaspora jobs are cut, remittances fall and there is less food on tables around the world. A shipping lane closes and grain prices rise in a market thousands of miles away, placing pressure on households.

Figure 4 shows what harms and heals peace at each level, based on the detailed responses of volunteers.

What harms and heals peace

Connected conditions, from everyday life to the environment

What harms peace

Land, nature and weather
- Failed rains, droughts and floods
- Deforestation, mining and degraded land
- Disasters that force people from their homes

Government, law and institutions
- Corrupt officials; jobs given to friends and relatives
- Laws that are not enforced
- Elections that reignite divisions
- Police and courts that people do not trust
- Young people kept out of decisions

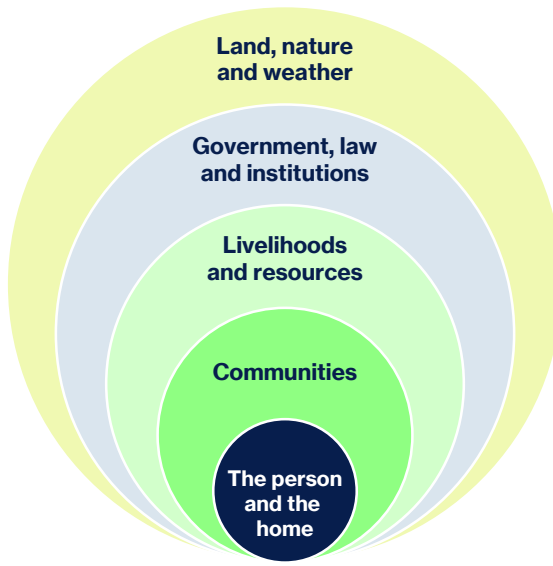
Livelihoods and resources
- Poverty, rising prices and hunger
- Young people with no work
- Fights over land, water and grazing
- Stealing and cattle raids in order to survive

Communities
- Rumours and false information
- Divisions between ethnic groups, religions and political sides
- Leaders who divide people for their own gain
- Elders and village groups that are overloaded or not trusted

The person and the home
- Violence inside the home
- Women, people with disabilities and minorities at risk
- Stress, trauma and memories of war
- Living in fear
- Drugs and alcohol

Levels of peace

Peace is a connected system



Changes at one level can reinforce or undermine peace at other levels.

What heals peace

Land, nature and weather
- Looking after the land together
- Early warning and disaster preparedness
- Sharing water and land fairly

Government, law and institutions
- Safety and courts that treat everyone equally
- Rights respected in everyday life
- Young people given a say in decisions
- Leaders who open doors

Livelihoods and resources
- Jobs, skills and small businesses, especially for young people
- Fair markets and fair prices
- Alternative livelihoods when resources are scarce

Communities
- Talking, listening and small acts of respect
- Elders, mothers, religious leaders and village meetings
- Working, playing sport and celebrating together
- Peace education and help to settle disputes

The person and the home
- Talking and respect inside the home
- Care, protection and support
- Mental health support after violence
- Girls and boys in school

Five levels are shown in the source diagram. Circle sizes and positions are conceptual, not quantitative.

Source: IFRC Global Study on Peace; volunteer reflections and think-tank synthesis.

Figure 4 **Peace as a system: what harms and heals peace at each level**

3.4 Peace is also a process

The system described above is half of the picture. Peace is also seen by volunteers as a process. It is harmed by behaviours, actions or events that cascade from one level to another, and it is healed the same way.

Volunteers describe both vicious and virtuous circles that run between the levels, feeding back on themselves in ways that either amplify or damage peace.

The three stories in the introduction show harmful dynamics of peace, and Figures 5 to 7 below show how each one maps on the levels of the system, and how each is a vicious circle that loops back to where it began.

Think-tank participants from 14 countries recognised and validated all three harmful dynamics as also playing out where they live.

Dynamic 1. Young people and elections. From no work (step 1) to violence at election time (step 6), and repeated at the next election. Volunteers are already pointing to forthcoming electoral cycles with concern.

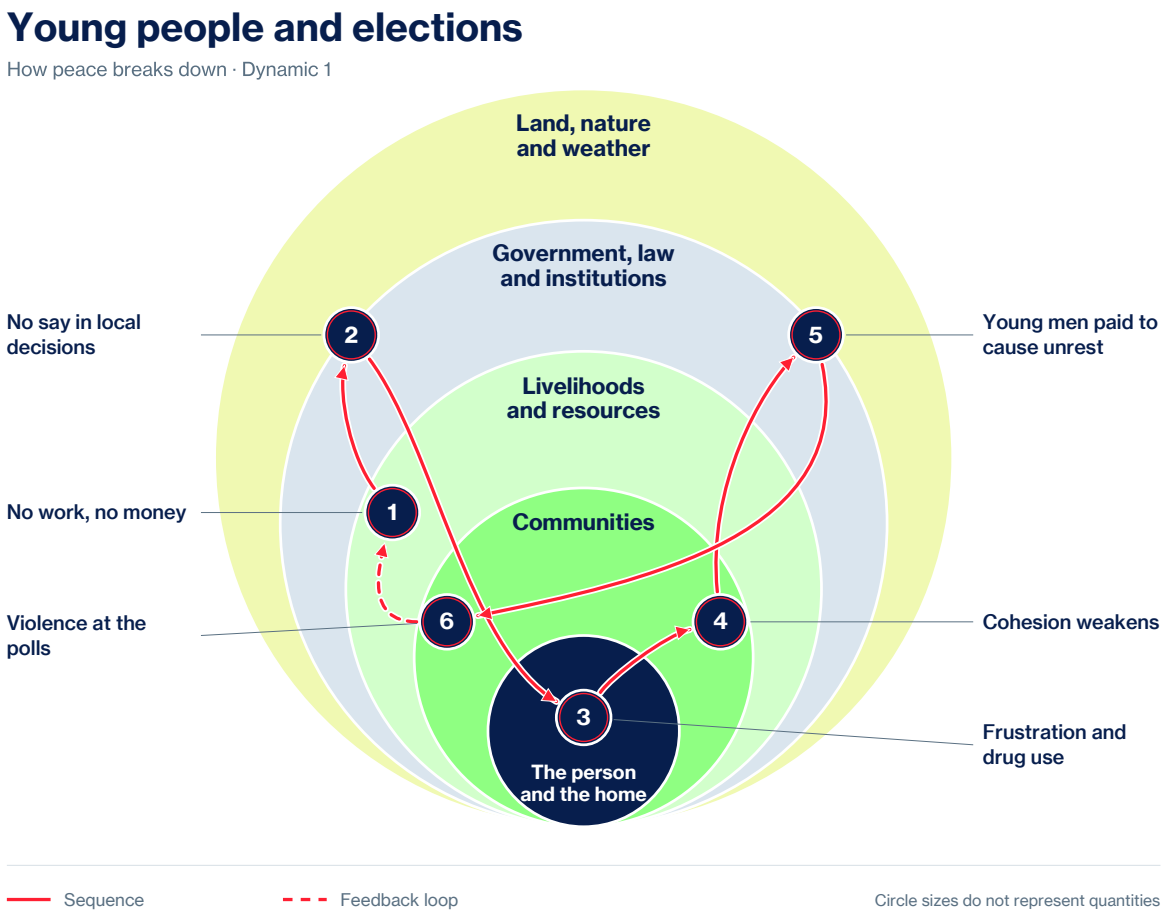


Figure 5 **How peace breaks down, dynamic 1 of 3 - young people and elections.**

Dynamic 2. Rains and raids. From failed rains (step 1) to raids to cycles of revenge (step 5) that make the next dry season more troublesome (step 6).

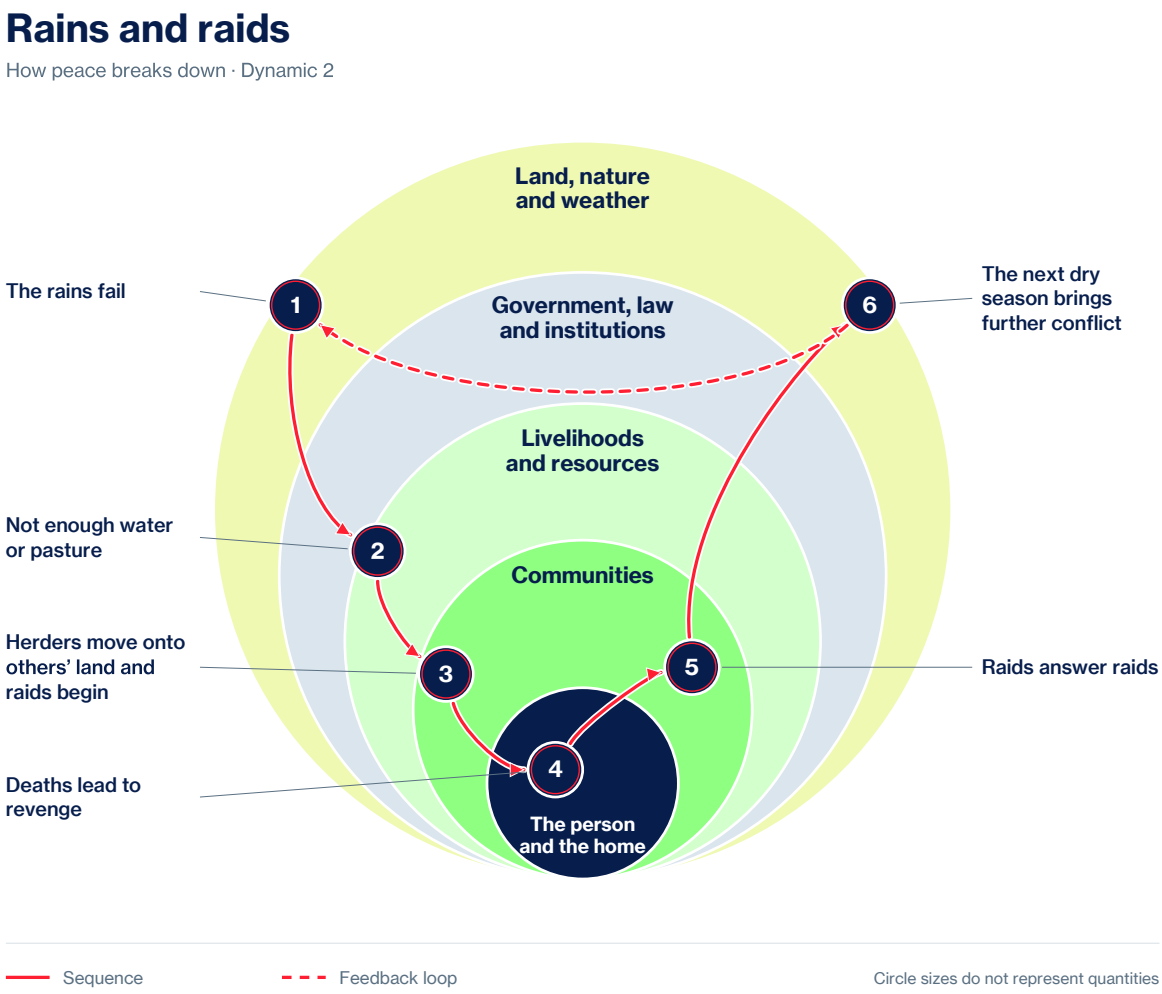


Figure 6 **How peace breaks down, dynamic 2 of 3: rains and raids.**

Dynamic 3. Cross-border recruitment, attacks and blame. From recruitment (step 1) to violence to stigma and mistrust (step 2), and more recruitment (step 3).

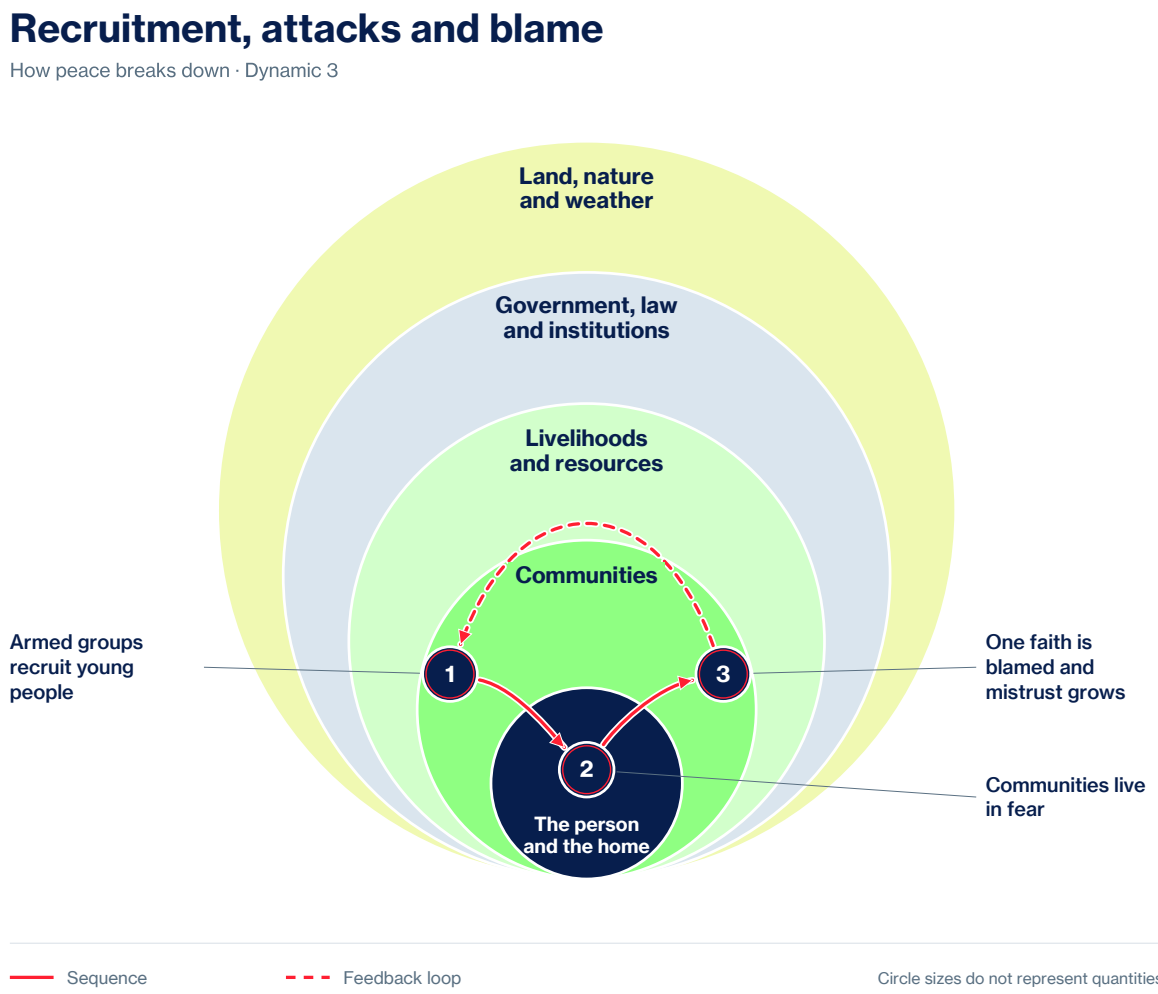


Figure 7 **How peace breaks down, dynamic 3 of 3: recruitment, attacks and blame**

Dynamic 4: A light in the darkness. Healing moves through the levels too, and more slowly. Figure 8 shows one Limitless Peace project in Kenya on the same peace system. The youth advocacy hub and local data repository initiative led by James Kany, a young volunteer, educator and community advocate. James chose to address the exclusions that underpin dynamic 1.

Through his work, young people gather evidence on what their community needs and hold it in a shared data repository (step 1). Policy briefs are put to county and ward leaders and chiefs in advocacy forums (step 2). Youth-led initiatives begin to shape resources and development (step 3). Disillusionment turns into civic engagement (step 4), and newly engaged young people gather more in the next round of evidence.

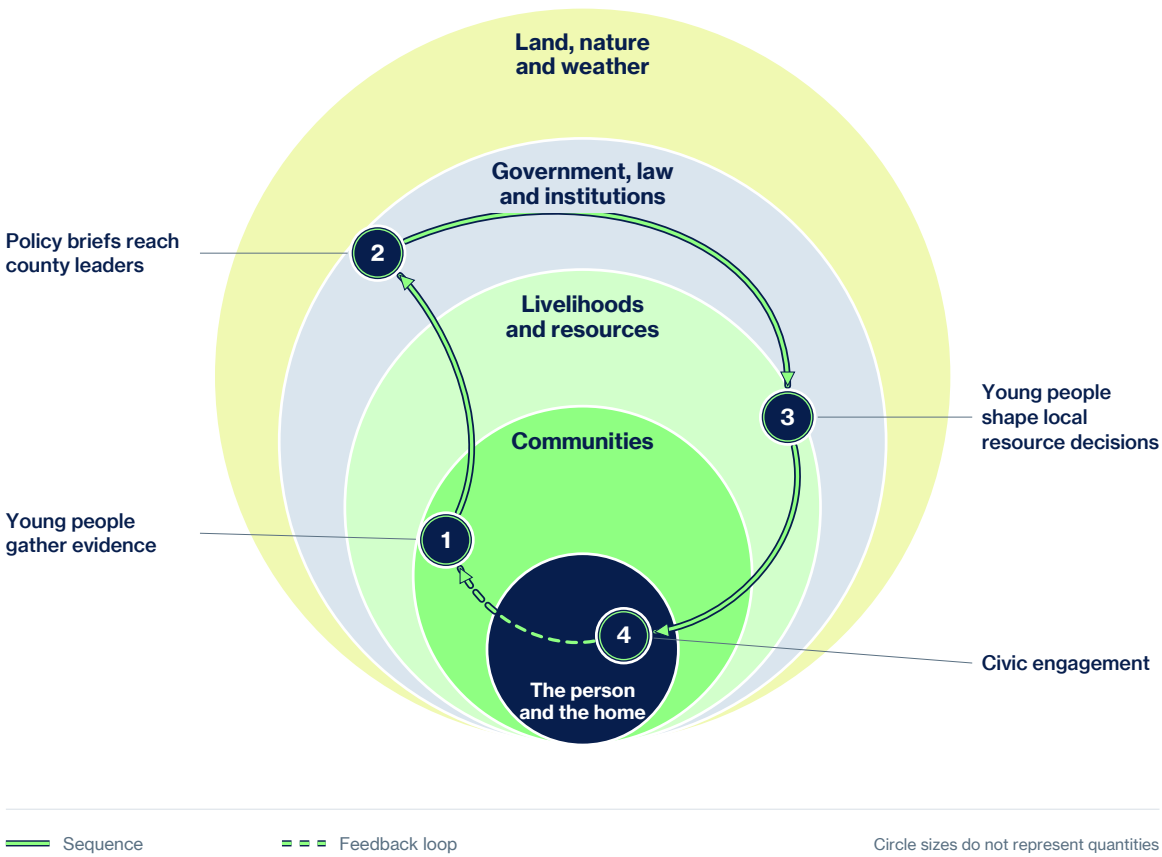
This addresses peace-harming dynamics in three direct ways:

- by providing a seat at the table for young people where there was none
- by securing a path to resources where there was no work, and
- by providing a reason to engage rather than withdraw.

Young people with a voice and a stake are harder to recruit, and county leaders who listen to young people can be engaged on other matters.

Youth evidence and action

How peace grows · Dynamic 4



Source: James Kany, Youth Advocacy Hub and Local Data Repository, IFRC Limitless 3 Peace Edition.

Figure 8 **Limitless Peace: a young Kenyan volunteer’s light in the darkness. Source: James Kany, Youth Advocacy Hub and Local Data Repository, IFRC Limitless 3 Peace Edition.**

All of the peace healing work that volunteers describe across the Global Study takes this same shape. These efforts all start at one level, reach others, and then feedback to reinforce and strengthen peace at their starting points.

Beekeeping in a pastoralist area is both a livelihood diversification project and a way of making peace in the face of crop and rain failure.

Psychosocial support after violence is care at home and the beginnings of building trust across a community.

A community meeting called twice a month is both vital dialogue and a way of keeping land and resource disputes off the streets.

> **Peace begins with us. Misunderstandings, poverty and unfair sharing of resources can cause conflict. We can build peace through dialogue, forgiveness, respect and cooperation. Let us listen to one another, resolve disagreements peacefully and work together for a united community. Peace needs action.”**

Volunteer, **Uganda**

James Kany’s project is one of over 3,500 that young volunteers submitted to Limitless for Peace in 2026. Box 4 below shows what these projects say about the main challenges to peace in each region, the strengths young people build on to make peace, and typical examples of the projects.

Box 4

Limitless for Peace: challenges and strengths by region

Young volunteers in the Limitless for Peace programme are designing and testing their own peace projects. Over 3,500 have been submitted. The table summarises what the project proposals say about the main challenges to peace where they live, the strengths they build on, and what their projects do.

Region	Main challenges	Strengths to build on	In their words	What it looks like in practice
Africa	• Not enough water, land and pasture to go round • Young people with no work and too much time on their hands • Politicians who stir people up and spread false information	• Elders and religious leaders who settle disputes • Young people keen to start their own projects • Community systems that warn of trouble early	**"Competition for water and pastures are all limited, and this causes instability in the long run."** Limitless participant, Uganda **"Youth are replacing the idleness trap with economic pathways and leadership."** Limitless participant, Nigeria	**Shared resource management by phone.** Text alerts and simple maps help herders and farmers share resources such as water and grazing land fairly. **Work instead of idleness.** Training and apprenticeships give young people skills and a living, including in peace work, so they are harder to recruit into violence.
Middle East	• Deep trauma from war • Broken trust between neighbours and communities • People forced from home, with nowhere safe to meet	• People who recover and stand together • Arts and crafts used to work through pain • Peace that starts inside each person	**"The biggest barrier to peace is the fear left behind by conflict."** Limitless participant, Syria **"Working to build a united community after years of war."** Limitless participant, Iraq	**Support for the mind in everyday activities.** Psychological first aid is offered inside relaxed group activities such as craft workshops, so people get help without having to ask for it. **Safe places to talk.** Rooms or online groups where young people meet, rebuild trust and learn to talk through disagreements without violence.

Region	Main challenges	Strengths to build on	In their words	What it looks like in practice
Asia	• Hate online, and people who only hear views like their own • People left out, and frustrated with systems that do not work for them • Heavy pressure to compete at school and at work	• Skills in understanding and managing feelings • Young people who build digital solutions • Families that hold communities together	**"Even a person's dissatisfaction in life is a challenge to peace... small issues can grow into big floods."** Limitless participant, Sri Lanka **"Peace doesn't start at the top; it starts at the root, with empathy."** Limitless participant, Nepal	**Spotting hate online.** Young people learn to recognise hate speech and false information online, and to answer it calmly. **Working side by side.** People from different groups work together on shared goals, such as cleaning up their surroundings, and get to know each other along the way.
Latin America and the Caribbean	• Hostility towards people forced from their homes • Loss of culture and ancestral knowledge • Institutions that keep young people out	• Telling stories and remembering together • Bringing back traditional skills • Organised psychosocial support for newcomers	**"We face the dual violence of migration: fleeing violence only to face exclusion in host countries."** Limitless participant, Ecuador **"Losing our ancestral knowledge is a threat to both food security and cultural stability."** Limitless participant, Mexico	**Stories that bring people together.** Migrants and host communities share their stories and history, so each understands the other better. **Learning traditional skills.** Young people learn traditional farming and crafts, which gives them a place and a purpose in their community.
Europe	• Loneliness, and cities split into separate groups • A painful political past • Learning that does not turn into action	• New ways of teaching that incorporate peacemaking • Research and skills that help people cope with shocks • Links with partners around the world	**"I want to... create projects that make a difference... and help children react correctly in situations."** Limitless Participant, Armenia **"Overcoming a troublesome past to build a plural but united community."** Limitless participant, Italy	**Learning by doing.** Courses are redesigned so young people learn to solve real problems in their own communities. **Links with young people abroad.** Online networks connect youth projects with partners in other countries to share ideas and resources.

Source: IFRC Limitless 3 Peace Edition, project submissions, 2026.

4 Volunteer Recommendations on Peace

4.1 What volunteers already do for peace, and what they ask

Throughout the survey and the think-tanks, IFRC volunteers and staff described the work they do to advance peace in their communities. They provide psychosocial support and trauma care after violence. They bring divided neighbours into dialogue. They broker between neighbours and families, between herders and farmers, between communities and authorities, between host communities and migrants. They work on food, water, natural resources and jobs, the pressures that drive tension. They teach young people how to help others with dignity, how to settle a dispute and how to earn a living. They work with diaspora and migrants on cross-border concerns and against xenophobia.

> "Peace in communities like ours is built through direct action: training people to protect one another when they need it most."

Volunteer, **Colombia**

Added up across all of the countries covered in the Study, the work volunteers describe amounts to a presence for peace at every level of the system. The people of the Red Cross and Red Crescent live, work and volunteer where peace is made day to day, in households and communities. They serve everyone impartially, so they can be present when other actors cannot. Few actors can claim such reach. Remarkably, this work is also strongly aligned with the available evidence on what makes peace work effective (see Box 5).

Box 5

Extensive evidence says volunteers are doing the right things

Four messages recur across syntheses of more than 700 peace studies from every region of the world.[12] Each one describes work that volunteers already do.

Indirect beats direct. Approaches where people meet around shared needs do at least as well as direct peace programmes and typically do less harm. In Iraq, mixed-faith football teams improved cooperation between players.[13] Volunteers' first aid, football pitches and community meetings are indirect approaches.

Combined beats single. In West Africa, psychosocial therapy for young high risk men was combined with economic support and proved better at reducing crime and violence than either

of these interventions alone.[14] Volunteers describe exactly these combinations, beekeeping with dialogue, first aid with trust.

Sustained beats one-off. Single radio broadcasts in support of peace in Sierra Leone did not change anything measurable, while sustained programming over months in Mali and Niger slowed the spread of violence in the areas reached.[15] Volunteers are present before, during and after a crisis, which is what sustained means.

Impartial beats partisan. Delivery that people can see is impartial matters everywhere. Programmes seen as biased or run by outside interests created harm in many countries. This is the most consistent risk across all of the studies, and it is the Network's founding principle.

Despite this considerable wealth of experience and practice, there are also some sobering messages. Volunteers say that most of this work is not sufficiently funded, counted nor connected to similar efforts, and to relevant ongoing programmes. Volunteers observed that considerable gains could be made in impacts if more attention and resources were devoted to this work.

The Network should recognise the work for what it is, the glue that holds communities together in the midst of conflict and division, and the reason its programmes can succeed at all.

> **"Peace is a daily, active practice. It is not a permanent state we achieve and then forget about; it's a muscle we have to build."**

Volunteer, **Pakistan**

4.2 Opportunities and risks of inaction: four futures to 2030

The think-tanks shaped and tested four future scenarios for the Network to 2030. In their judgement, the Network today sits between the first two.

- **Off-grid.** Staff and volunteers continue to make unseen efforts for peace every day, but the Network has no clear principled position and no resources behind them.
- **Power cut.** The Network develops a position, but it is not followed up with resources, skills or support.
- **Short circuit.** The Network and its members take up peace directly and fast, but the lack of a clear position puts neutrality, access and trust at risk.
- **Live connection.** The Network adopts a principled position and lines up resources behind it. Young people have a seat and a clear mandate. Existing efforts are joined up, connecting the lights in the darkness.

To move to Live connection, Volunteers recommend that the IFRC Network needs to acknowledge the importance of this work and its own potential as an actor for peace, and to work through what that means for strategy, operations and culture.

> **[We must] integrate these groups and shine a light on them… include them through innovation and production… in this way we achieve cohesion…"**

Staff member, **Morocco**

The think-tank participants, volunteers and staff who live with these dynamics and advise this work from experience, made three suggestions to support this direction of travel.

- **Strengthen** the people and skills already working for peace in neutral and principled ways (see Box 6 for more on a principled approach to peace means for the Network).
- **Connect** these efforts, so that the enablers of peace, from psychosocial support and livelihoods to education and dialogue, are joined up and deliver more than the sum of their parts for communities.
- **Scale** this work, through investment and funding that lasts beyond short-term project cycles.

> **Tensions arise from hasty words or misunderstood gestures. But every tension invites us to stop, breathe, and choose whether to create distance or build a bridge. Peace is listening, respect, an outstretched hand."**

Volunteer, **Italy**

Box 6

Towards A Principled Approach to Peace?

> **Humanity: "... to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, co-operation and lasting peace amongst all peoples."**
>
> First Fundamental Principle of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

Many of the respondents in this study called for the organisation to develop a clear and principled approach to peace that helps frame the approaches of the IFRC Network and provide guidance for strategies and actions. Some suggested the Fundamental Principles as the starting point.

The Fundamental Principle of Humanity, provides the ethical basis for imagining, advocating for and creating the conditions for peace. Volunteers responding to the survey described doing this every day, at all levels of the ecosystem of peace.

The principle of impartiality, serving everyone on the basis of need, allows volunteers to be trusted across the lines that divide communities. Peace work seen as biased does more harm than good, as shown in Box 5. Other Principles, notably independence and neutrality, steer the organisation away from political mechanisms and negotiations. This is what volunteers warned against in the 'Short circuit' future, where they asked for clear boundaries for the Network's work on peace.

Collectively the principles, especially that of Humanity, helps to shape our approach and thinking on peace. For many humanitarians, preventing and alleviating suffering means constantly responding to immediate crises, one after another. The deeper proposition is that to genuinely prevent human suffering, we must also be concerned with the conditions that produce it, including engagement with the systemic, longer term conditions that threaten peace. This requires *sustained* activities and strategies.

'Humanity' also asks the Network to protect life and health and to ensure respect for every human being. A society may be at peace on paper, while millions of its people experience exclusion, discrimination, insecurity, or the systematic and daily denial of their dignity. 'Positive peace' moves beyond just the absence of fighting, to the conditions that centre dignity, security, justice and mutual respect. These are the conditions that volunteers described as being harmed and healed in Part 3 of this paper.

In many parts of the world, we can see relationships, institutions, trust, social cohesion and the hope of a shared future are wearing away. The work our volunteers are doing every day is helping preserve the social fabric of communities under extraordinary pressure. These activities are not formal *peacebuilding* interventions in themselves, but they are *peacemaking* in that they can help to sustain many of the essential conditions upon which peace depends.

The principle of Humanity promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples. In light of this, the pursuit of peace is not an incidental concern. It is deeply embedded within the 'Humanity' ambition and asks for sustained commitment.

Acting on peace now requires greater intellectual ambition, more commitment to resourcing, more effective humanitarian diplomacy and ensuring that the voices and experiences of communities influence decisions about their future.

If the Network follows the recommendations of the volunteers and young people in this study, it will also need RCRC leaders willing to work inclusively to affirm or where necessary develop, clear principled frameworks that will help to guide our work in peace, that will underpin our conviction that a more peaceful world is a profoundly humanitarian aspiration.

5 Leadership recommendations

> *...True peace begins when we are present at the moment someone needs us, not on the day after..."*
>
> Volunteer, **Morocco**

Drawing on the survey, the evidence and the think-tanks, there are three areas for IFRC leaders to consider. Each answers an ask in the volunteers' Letter for Peace. Together they would help to move the Network from where the volunteers place it today, between Off-grid and Power cut, to Live connection. The findings in this paper, and these three areas, are meant to support senior leaders of the IFRC network in their deliberations in key upcoming forums on their strategy and policy approaches in peace.

5.1 A clear Network position for peace

Set out a Network position on peace, grounded in the Fundamental Principles and the commitments already made in the 2024 Council of Delegates resolution. The position has three parts.

- **A definition.** Say what peace means for the Network: peacemaking through humanitarian work, at the level of the person, the home and the community, with no part in political negotiation between the parties to a conflict. The ecology of peace in section 3 offers a starting framework.
- **Clear boundaries.** Say what the Network will not do: stand-alone, short-term peace programmes run from outside, or any work that puts neutrality, independence and access at risk.
- **Resources and a roadmap.** Make a sustained commitment to resources behind the position inside existing work, with a roadmap that builds

peace approaches into current programmes and tracks progress against specific measures. Say how National Societies pursue peace with neutrality and independence intact, and how they use their voice, partnerships and humanitarian diplomacy to influence others on the things they cannot fix alone: poverty, unemployment, unequal access to rights and justice, misinformation and competition over resources.

This responds to the requests from volunteers in this study to make the work permanent and sustainable, and to act on what humanitarian work cannot fix alone.

5.2 Voice and skills for peace: young people and women

Give young volunteers, young people in the communities they serve, and the women who hold peace together at all levels a formal role in the decisions that National Societies and the Network take on peace. Train volunteers and staff in dialogue, mediation, conflict resolution, conflict sensitivity and non-violent communication, and keep trained people between projects. Fund and guide youth-led initiatives that build on the knowledge of their own communities, and assess how that support is used. Trust them to do the work.

This responds to the requests from volunteers in this study to train volunteers and staff, to involve volunteers in policy, and to fund and guide youth-led initiatives.

5.3 Dialogue, learning and evidence for peace

Build Network-wide dialogue, learning and evidence on peace. Build peace sensitivity into the design and delivery of what the Network already does, and connect peace with livelihoods, mental health and protection, where volunteers already do most of it. Count the work under way, track what changes, and report on it regularly. Run the Global Study again regularly as an ongoing index.

This responds to the requests from volunteers in this study to connect peace with other work and to build Network-wide dialogue, learning and evidence.

None of the above asks the Network to become something it is not. It asks it to see what its volunteers already do, in some of the hardest places in the world, to name it, to resource it, and to connect it.

The lights in the darkness are already glimmering. The work ahead is to strengthen, expand and connect them.

> **A single light can illuminate countless lives. In a world where challenges and conflicts exist, each act of kindness, compassion, and understanding brings us one step closer to lasting peace.”**

Kiosk comment, **Nigeria**

Endnotes

1 Voices for Peace survey export, 2 November 2026: 3,775 responses from 109 countries, 21 May to 2 November 2026. Entries flagged as duplicates or as machine-generated were excluded from the analysis in this paper.

2 Uppsala Conflict Data Program, Uppsala University, "Record number of armed conflicts in the world", press release, 11 June 2025. State-based armed conflicts in 2024: 61; wars with 1,000 or more battle-related deaths: 11.

3 International Committee of the Red Cross, *ICRC Humanitarian Outlook 2026: A World Succumbing to War* (Geneva: ICRC, 2025).

4 Ibid.

5 UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2024* (Geneva: UNHCR, June 2025). 123 million at end-2024.

6 This is what the peace field calls Track 1 diplomacy: official negotiation between governments and the leaderships of conflict parties, usually with a state or an international organisation as mediator. Track 2 is unofficial dialogue between influential people outside government. Track 3 is peace work at community level. See L. Diamond and J. McDonald, *Multi-Track Diplomacy: A Systems Approach to Peace* (West Hartford: Kumarian Press, 1996).

7 Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Peace Index 2024* (Sydney: IEP, June 2024), p. 2. The share of conflicts ending in a peace agreement fell from 23 per cent in the 1970s to 4 per cent in the 2010s. The share ending in decisive military victory fell from 49 per cent to 9 per cent.

8 World Red Cross Conference on Peace, Belgrade, 1975, *Programme of Action of the Red Cross as a Factor of Peace*; Second World Red Cross and Red Crescent Conference on Peace, Åland and Stockholm, 1984, *Fundamental Guidelines for the Contribution of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to a True Peace in the World*.

9 Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, Resolution 7 (CD/24/R7), "Reaffirming the role of the Movement as a factor of peace", Geneva, October 2024.

10 Fund for Peace, *Fragile States Index 2024* (Washington DC: Fund for Peace, 2024). Scores from 0 to 120; higher is more fragile.

11 Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Peace Index 2026* (Sydney: IEP, June 2026). Scores from 1 to 5; higher is less peaceful.

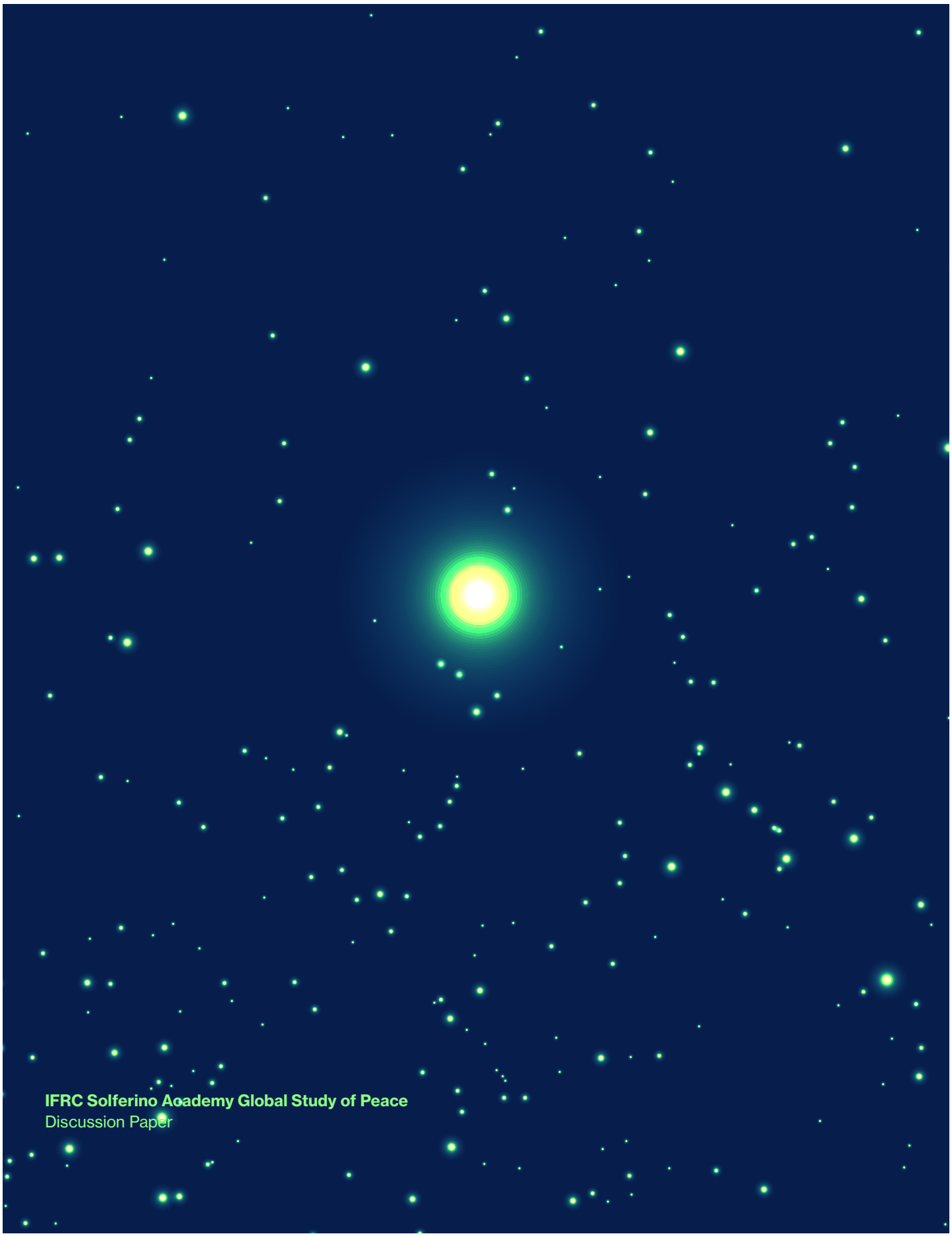
12 Evidence synthesis prepared for the Global Study on Peace, IFRC Solferino Academy, 2026, drawing on systematic reviews and meta-analyses of peacebuilding interventions.

13 S. Mousa, "Building social cohesion between Christians and Muslims through soccer in post-ISIS Iraq", *Science* 369(6505), 2020.

14 Blattman, Christopher, Julian C. Jamison, and Margaret Sheridan. 2017. "Reducing Crime and Violence: Experimental Evidence from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy in Liberia." *American Economic Review* 107 (4): 1165–1206.

15 N. Ferguson, L. Hosford, L. Ungwang and P. Rebolledo, *Impact Assessment: Evaluation of Pro-Peace Interventions to Build Trust and for Awareness-Raising and Sensitization at the Mali and Niger Border* (Berlin: ISDC, 2025); L. Hosford et al., "Harmony on the airwaves? Evidence from peace radio at the Mali/Niger border", *Journal of Development Effectiveness*, 2026; T. Orozco Garcia, N. Ferguson, P. Rebolledo and P. Schröder, *Impact Evaluation of the UN Peacebuilding Fund's Radio Broadcasting for Community-based Conflict Management: The Case of Niger* (Berlin: ISDC, 2026).

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