

FINAL REPORT

**An Evaluation Report of Bridging the “Youth Gap” – Strengthening
Community-Based Reintegration Mechanisms – A IOM/UNICEF
Partnership for Community Youth & Youth Formerly Associated
with Al-Shabaab**

**Commissioned by:
International Organization for Migration (IOM)
and
United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)**

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ACRONYMS

AS	Al-Shabaab
CAAFAG	Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups
CDCs	Community Development Committees
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
DDRR	Disengagement, Disassociation, Reintegration and Reconciliation
DRP	Defector Rehabilitation Programme
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
IPs	Implementing Partners
IOM	International Organization for Migration
KII	Key Informant Interview
MoIS	Ministry of Internal Security
NISA	National Intelligence Security Agency
SDRS	Sustainable Development and Reintegration Solutions
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNOCT	United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism
UNPBF	United Nations Peace Building Fund
UNSOM	United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia
WHO	World Health Organization
YFAWAS	Youth Formerly Associated with Al-Shabaab

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Bridging the “Youth Gap” – Strengthening Community-Based Reintegration Mechanisms – A IOM/UNICEF Partnership for Community Youth & Youth Formerly Associated with Al-Shabaab (AS) project was a community-led joint reintegration and youth development project for youth formerly associated with AS (YFAWAS) and marginalized community youth in Baidoa (Southwest), Kismayo (Jubaland), and Jowhar and Beletweyne (Hirshabelle). IOM implemented the project in Kismayo and Baidoa districts through Southern Aid and Sustainable Development and Reintegration Solutions (SDRS) respectively, while UNICEF¹ in partnership with Intersom implemented the project in Beledweyne and Jowhar. The objective of the project was twofold; to increase community acceptance of YFAWAS, and to increase access to opportunities for marginalized community youth to meaningfully contribute to their communities. This evaluation study was subsequently conducted to assess the key outcome indicators as reflected in the project results framework (see Evaluation Matrix in Appendix). The seven criteria are: relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability, and cross-cutting issues of gender. This evaluation also looks at challenges and remaining gaps, reflects on lessons and best practices, and provides concrete recommendations.

Relevance

Overall, this evaluation finds that the portfolios of the United Nations Peace Building Fund (UNPBF) project have been broadly relevant to the needs of the direct beneficiaries and local communities, and to overall peacebuilding efforts in the project’s locations. Prime among the objectives of the project was addressing one of the most pernicious components of conflict in Somalia – that of armed and violent groups recruiting children and youth – by welcoming young people formally associated with AS. Therefore, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) targeted not only those children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG) and youth who were formerly associated with AS (YFAWAS), but also marginalized children and youth who had not (yet) associated with an armed group, to ensure that further participation in violence and recruitment is contained. This strategy was premised on the fact that the drivers for young people to engage in violence are rooted in experiences of injustice, discrimination and marginalization. In alignment with the individual need to feel significant, many of these young people come from minority clans that perceive themselves to be oppressed by more powerful clans and/or by the government.

The project was also firmly aligned with UNPBF, IOM and UNICEF guidelines, strategies, and frameworks related to the reintegration of youth and children in post-conflict settings, showcasing a clear understanding of and responsiveness to the priorities set forth by the Somali government. For example, the project followed the IOM Standard Operating Procedures for the Disengagement and Reintegration of YFAWAS and CAAFAG, which provides a comprehensive and holistic approach to reintegration, based on the principles of child protection, best interest of the child, do no harm, and participation. The project was also aligned with the UNICEF Child Protection Strategy and Policy, which promotes a systems approach to child protection, focusing on strengthening the capacities of families, communities, and institutions to prevent and respond to child protection risks and violations. Similarly, the project was conducted in line with the Somalia National Programme on the Treatment and Handling of Disengaged Combatants (2013), in close coordination with the Defector Rehabilitation Programme (DRP) under the Ministry of Internal Security (MoIS), ensuring age appropriate and gender responsive approaches to reintegration of youth. In addition, the project incorporated other strategic frameworks including the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework for Somalia (2021-2025) (specifically, strategic priority number 2: security

¹ After the launch of the project, the UNICEF’s project site was shifted from Dhusamareb to Beledweyne because of change of partnership and the need to invest on the new reintegration locations

and rule of law), the Secretary General's Peacebuilding Fund Strategy (2020-2024), and UN Security Council Resolutions.

Coherence

The project actively engaged in partnerships and complemented existing initiatives, thus avoiding duplication and maximizing impact. This collaborative approach allowed for a comprehensive and integrated response to the challenges addressed by IOM, UNICEF, and other stakeholders in the targeted areas. In terms of external coherence, the project worked closely with implementing partner organizations (Southern Aid, SDRS and Intersom), Ministry of Internal Security (MoIS) officials at both state and federal levels as well as DRP and National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA). Other external partners included the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) and the Elman Peace Foundation. However, despite the collaborative nature of the project, some delays were experienced during the formative stage of project implementation as IOM and UNICEF discussed harmonization of monitoring tools and the theory of change. Project staff observed that extensive consultations were needed to ensure perspectives of both main implementing partners were taken into consideration and that since UNICEF is a child-focused organization, they have a particular responsibility in ensuring that all safeguards are in place when children are involved - thus tools needed to be adapted to not only be child friendly but also to consider the highly vulnerable group of children who have been associated with armed forces and armed groups.

Effectiveness

Overall, the UNPBF project was successful in contributing to the community acceptance of YFAWAS and CAAFAG, promoting the sustainable reintegration of targeted ex-combatants and children and youth-at-risk into mainstream society. The project implemented targeted activities to achieve its goals, notably through the establishment of safe spaces, case management and counseling, social connections and mentorship, vocational skills training, social and emotional skills building, and community development grants. The project also employed community-based reintegration mechanisms to foster acceptance, including workshops, awareness raising community dialogues, and trainings for the implementing partners (IPs).

Findings of this evaluation indicate that the intervention has been highly effective in achieving its objectives. The project's community initiatives led to successful reintegration of children and YFAWAS, fostering a sense of ownership and helping them develop into integral members embraced by the community. These initiatives included skill development in various areas, literacy programs, and infrastructure improvement projects, all of which have significantly contributed to the empowerment and successful reintegration of beneficiaries. The project also helped many young people to start their own businesses, and the entrepreneurial spirit and ambition of these participants was an unexpected positive outcome. However, some mentioned that they faced challenges in the formative months of their startup, as they struggled with finding enough capital to cover their costs, which forced some to abandon their businesses.

Efficiency

Overall, the project proposal's planned outputs and outcomes have been largely fulfilled, with nearly all the targets achieved within the stipulated timeframe, including the enrollment of the target beneficiaries. At project implementation level, the choice of working through experienced local civil society organizations (CSOs) and line ministries as IPs was seen as an efficient method of project delivery in a context where security concerns are common in the project's operational areas. This community-based approach was implemented with a view to promoting ownership by local communities and the government. Project stakeholders actually argued that if the project had adopted a residential reintegration method, more resources would have been spent on boarding

facilities – they provided examples of successful efforts to improve the efficiency or “value for money” of activities citing that the community-based approach was an efficient and less costly intervention. Furthermore, the structure of administering such sensitive a project through local CSOs saved on security and other related costs. Other factors that also contributed to the project’s efficiency included the deployment of qualified staff who delivered project activities on time.

Despite best efforts, a few beneficiaries dropped out temporarily, citing engagement in casual jobs elsewhere, only to later return and express their commitment to the project. This was particularly mentioned by interviewed YFAWAS and community members in Baidoa. Despite these challenges, the project has made substantial progress in meeting its intended objectives. This is even despite the fact that IOM was not able to deliver on the reintegration of a whole age group of 14-17 in its project areas, namely Kismayo and Baidoa, however it is important to note that children in this age group did benefit from services in these areas through UNICEF supported interventions with a specialized child protection CSO and with MOIS.

Impact

Analysis shows that stakeholder responses to the project’s early impacts were overwhelmingly positive. They strongly agree that the intervention has benefited the target populations, and that it complemented government priorities. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with stakeholders and discussions with the beneficiary communities also confirm this conclusion. Both groups acknowledged that the project’s impact on the community has been widely appreciated, and that the project has proven to be a valuable resource for YFAWAS and CAAFAG seeking reintegration support.

The impact on peacebuilding stands out as a significant positive outcome. Stakeholders concurred that the project has created lasting changes, particularly in skills development, community acceptance, and infrastructure development, laying the foundation for sustained positive impacts. Overall, this evaluation notes that the project had the following impacts: improved social cohesion, successful reintegration of YFAWAS and CAAFAG, enhanced vocational skills, and vital economic assistance to beneficiaries.

Sustainability

It is evident that the project will bring about significant long-term changes in line with its objectives. The skills imparted to the beneficiaries, ranging from vocational training to literacy programs, stand out as enduring assets, contributing to the promotion of sustainable livelihoods and economic empowerment within the community. The heightened awareness of the experiences of YFAWAS and CAAFAG, generated through targeted community engagement, has fostered lasting understanding and acceptance, particularly concerning the reintegration of YFAWAS. Moreover, the construction of infrastructure such as the bridge in Baidoa, represents a lasting change in community connectivity and accessibility. These tangible and enduring outcomes underscore the project’s success in not only meeting its immediate objectives but also in laying the foundation for sustained positive impact within the community over the long term.

Nevertheless, this evaluation notes that while the relevant government authorities exhibit commitment to maintaining the project’s benefits, there is need for additional support. Challenges include financial and technical constraints, necessitating collaborative efforts to overcome obstacles. The relevant government authorities, both at the state and federal levels, currently lack the necessary financial and technical capacities. The deficiency in resources and widespread commitment poses significant challenges to the sustainability of the project's outcomes. Additional support and resources are crucially needed to bridge this gap and ensure the continued success and impact of the project.

Cross-Cutting Issues of Gender

In fragile contexts such as Somalia, the experiences of women, girls, men and boys can be quite different. The project directly or indirectly mainstreamed cross-cutting issues of gender, protection, disaster risk reduction, conflict, and capacity building. The project design also emphasizes the inclusion of women in project activities, because prevailing gender disparities in Somalia requires a focus on women as a vulnerable population.

The project's gender-focused approach, focused on supporting both male and female within the target communities, has proven to be an effective strategy for promoting social development among vulnerable populations in the project areas. A commitment to promoting gender equality was integral to the project, and rigorous steps were taken to integrate inclusive practices that acknowledged and responded to the diverse roles and experiences of individuals based on their gender. This approach not only contributed to the project's effectiveness, but also fostered more equitable and inclusive impact within the targeted communities. Women and girls were primary beneficiaries particularly for activities traditionally associated with women and girls, such as tailoring and henna. Moreover, given that a large number of female participants had defected and continue to defect from AS, the project's deliberate focus on addressing gender-specific needs and challenges resulted in concrete contributions to fostering equality and enhancing the empowerment of girls.

However, this evaluation also identified contextual constraints arising from the ways in which women and girls experience conflict and peacebuilding differently to men and boys, and the challenges facing women and girls in the communities most impacted by conflict and violence. From KIIs, while the project brought about improvements in addressing the needs of women and girls, there is still much more that can be done to increase the participation of more women and girls in such projects. For instance, the caseload for women and girl beneficiaries was lower than their male counterparts, despite the equal need for reintegration support across gender.

Lessons Learned and Good Practices

1. Community-based reintegration initiative in comparison with the traditional residential rehabilitation modality is a more viable, less costly method, more sustainable and comparatively offers value for money.
2. Skills development is pivotal in empowering vocational skills graduates for sustainable livelihoods, as evidenced by their improved capabilities and independent employment.
3. Different stakeholders, particularly government agencies, local communities and CSOs, can actually work together and deliver joint implementation of sensitive projects such as Disengagement, Disassociation, Reintegration and Reconciliation (DDRR).
4. Communities in the project locations are willing and ready to welcome YFAWAS and CAAFAG, despite the dark past of these groups.
5. To recognize the diverse interests of individuals, it is necessary to offer a wide range of vocational courses, to allow beneficiaries to choose programs aligned with their preferences.
6. Incentives are important, especially in ensuring optimal class attendance among adult beneficiaries who require compensation for their time commitment.
7. There is a critical need for broader awareness campaigns to enhance reintegration efforts, campaigns that emphasize the community's welcoming nature and encourage more individuals to surrender to the government.

8. Stakeholders learned about the potential for refining future initiatives in youth reintegration, emphasizing tailored skill development, incentivized learning, and community awareness as integral components of successful interventions.
9. Mentorship and religious counselling can have a positive influence on YFAWAS.
10. Skills offered in safe spaces create useful opportunities for social interaction among YFAWAS, marginalized community youth and other community members.

Recommendations

1. Increase coverage and targeting as there is a huge gap between the number of beneficiaries vis-a-vis the need. There are an increasing number of men, women and children that are in need of DDDR services.
2. Develop a post-reintegration economic assistance and follow-up plan for those who graduate from the DDDR programs. While the project offered vocational skills trainings, there is still a need to support the graduates with startup capital and grants to cover rental expenses and other incentives for a period of six months to avoid early drop out. Incorporating incentives during the learning period is crucial as it plays a pivotal role in ensuring learners prioritize their classes over casual job opportunities.
3. Train communities and mentors on ways to track, monitor, and treat YFAWAS and CAAFAG to ensure a more sustainable social cohesion for graduates of reintegration programs. This can be achieved through inclusive and participatory DDDR community planning.
4. IOM and UNICEF should advocate for the decreased use of residential reintegration and promote the adoption of community-based reintegration systems. This stems from stakeholders' arguments that it is less costly to implement community-based reintegration, hence value for money
5. Expand access to psychosocial support and mentorship. One of the most impactful activities of the project was the case management and counselling activities, which helped many YFAWAS and CAAFAG fully reintegrate. Therefore, implementing more of these activities is highly recommended by project stakeholders, especially local elders and the IP staff.
6. Expand timeframes for reintegration programming for YFAWAS and CAAFAG. In the context of Somalia, characterized by long and devastating conflict and armed groups, addressing root causes of vulnerability leading to joining of armed groups is a long-term effort, hence the need to consider expanding such projects to multi-year interventions.
7. Expand the age bracket to 35 years. The current age criterion has presented a substantial challenge, given its initial specification of 14-25 years. Numerous instances have been observed where individuals above this age bracket are unable to participate in the project, even though they would likely benefit from it.
8. Allow beneficiaries to choose their learning paths. Providing a diverse range of options ensures that individuals can pursue subjects that align with their personal and professional aspirations.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context

Somalia has lacked a strong central government for nearly 32 years. The long-standing political instability and the absence of an effective government has had severe negative effects on human development, particularly in South and Central Somalia. Somalia is one of the poorest countries in the world with a per capita GDP of US\$ 425 and an estimated 43 per cent of the population living on less than US\$ 1 a day.² Poverty is more prevalent in the rural areas, where intractable conflicts, persistent droughts, lack of economic resources, and paucity of infrastructure have rendered many people helpless.³ The 2022 *Somalia Economic Update: Investing in Social Protection to Boost Resilience for Economic Growth* notes that poverty is particularly widespread in rural households and Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) settlements, with nearly 70 per cent of Somalis living below the poverty line and 90 per cent in great need of education, improved access to water, improved sanitation, and access to electricity.⁴ This increase in poverty levels can be attributed to recurrent external shocks and natural disasters, which have created widespread displacement and considerable demographic shifts.⁵

Longstanding and persistent civil war has completely shattered the country's political, social and economic structures. In addition, over three decades of conflict and violent extremism has fragmented communities and hindered development in Somalia. Youth (under the age of 35), who represent 75 per cent of the Somali population,⁶ have limited employment opportunities and prospects for fulfilling their potential, which increases their risk of being recruited by armed groups. The unemployment rate in Somalia is among the highest in the world. It is estimated that over 67 per cent of Somali youth in general and 74 per cent of Somali women are unemployed, with limited opportunities to earn livelihoods.⁷ Poverty and unemployment compel children and youth to opt for negative coping strategies such as joining armed groups while some may be forcibly recruited. Poverty and unemployment compel youth to opt for negative coping strategies such as joining armed groups. Complex clan loyalties between Somalis and the scarcity of resources have further aggravated an already volatile security context. The abundance of weapons in the hands of youth who grew up in a culture of violence escalates the dangerous situation. Armed youth play an instrumental role in inter-clan skirmishes that develop, sometimes, into wider inter-clan conflicts. It is against this backdrop that DDDR remains one of the most urgent priorities for peacebuilding in Somalia.

1.2 About the UNPBF Project

On 24 February 2022, IOM and UNICEF, with the support of UNPBF, launched a pilot project titled: Bridging the "Youth Gap" – Strengthening Community-Based Reintegration Mechanisms – A IOM/UNICEF Partnership for Community Youth and YFAWAS. The project piloted a youth- and community-led joint reintegration and development program for YFAWAS and marginalized community youth in Baidoa (Southwest), Kismayo (Jubaland), and Jowhar and Beletweyne (Hirshabelle). IOM implemented the project in Kismayo and Baidoa districts through Southern Aid

² Somali Poverty and Vulnerability Assessment: Findings from Wave 2 of the Somali High Frequency Survey, World Bank 2019

³ Looking Towards a Brighter Tomorrow: Educational Characteristics of the Somalia People, UNFPA 2016

⁴ [Somalia Economic Update: Investing in Social Protection to Boost Resilience for Economic Growth](#), World Bank 2022

⁵ Somalia National Bureau of Statistics Voluntary National Review Report, 2022

⁶ UNFPA based on PESS 2014, The Somali Youth in Figures

⁷ Socio-Economic Reintegration of Ex-Combatants and At-Risk Youth (SRECYAR) Project Completion Report (PCR), Africa Development Bank, September 2020

and Sustainable Development and Reintegration Solutions (SDRS) respectively, while UNICEF⁸ in partnership with Intersom implemented the project in Beledweyne and Jowhar. The community-based reintegration modality tackles youth engagement in AS and is thus a strong entry point for catalytic results and future funding opportunities as donors shift towards non-residential approaches that increase the number of beneficiaries served. The objective of the project was twofold; to increase community acceptance of YFAWAS and to increase access to opportunities for marginalized community youth to meaningfully contribute to their communities.

The project also fills a service delivery gap for marginalized community youth, addressing essential conditions for building and sustaining peace and reducing the likelihood of recidivism and re-recruitment by centering youth grievances and promoting youth agency in project design. The project bridges the critical developmental period from childhood through young adulthood by providing services for youth aged 14-25. In total, the project targeted 1,200 youth, including 600 CAAFAG/YFAWAS and 600 marginalized community youth. The project was designed to promote sustainable reintegration of youth-at-risk into mainstream Somali society. Skills training for youth was considered crucial to facilitate their inclusion into society and enhance their contribution to state formation and recovery processes. To this end, the project established four safe spaces in project locations.

Table 1 Breakdown of the project beneficiaries

Beneficiary Category	YFAWAS	Marginalized Community Youth	Total
Male aged 14-17	239 (0 IOM and 239 UNICEF)	229 (105 IOM and 124 UNICEF)	468
Male aged 18-24	154 (124 IOM and 30 UNICEF)	117 (117 IOM and 0 UNICEF)	271
Female aged 14-17	58 (0 IOM and 58 UNICEF)	166 (136 IOM and 30 UNICEF)	224
Female aged 18-25	197 (197 IOM and 0 UNICEF)	164 (152 IOM and 12 UNICEF)	361
Total	648	676	1,324

1.3 Project Theory of Change

Within the context of Somalia, the application of intentional youth-adult relationships for improved mental wellbeing is likely to be well received, given the important role of and deference to community elders in decision-making processes. Supporting these linkages early-on provides a mechanism for youth engagement, albeit peripherally, within existing political and conflict resolution mechanisms. Therefore, the project envisages the Theory of Change as follows:

IF we can build community acceptance for YFAWAS; and **IF** we can improve community perceptions of youth in the community; and **IF** we can build the mental health and resilience of YFAWAS and marginalized community youth, by strengthening youth's sense of purpose, building strong social networks, and contributing to local community initiatives, **THEN** YFAWAS will effectively reintegrate, societal motivations to join AS will deteriorate for youth in the community, and communities will be more responsive to the needs of youth, **BECAUSE** there will be goodwill on the part of the community, and both marginalized community youth and YFAWAS will have the skill sets to positively contribute to the community.

The project aimed for two outcomes, each with two clear outputs:

⁸ After the launch of the project, the UNICEF's project site was shifted from Dhusamareb to Beledweyne because of change of partnership and the need to invest on the new reintegration locations

Outcomes	Outputs
1. YFAWAS are socially accepted into the community.	1. YFAWAS have improved mental health and resilience to support reintegration at the individual level. 2. Community members are more accepting of YFAWAS reintegrating into their communities.
2. Marginalized community youth have increased access to opportunities to meaningfully contribute to their communities.	1. Marginalized community youth have improved mental health and resilience 2. Community members have a more positive perspective on the contributions of youth in the community

1.4 Evaluation Purpose

The overall purpose of this evaluation is to assess the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability and cross-cutting gender issues of the UNPBF project, in order to gauge the extent to which the objectives of the project were achieved. While this evaluation will apply the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) criteria with regards to the overall project, it will also examine how IOM and UNICEF contributed to achieving the objectives of the project, in terms of whether their different geographical focuses and technical approaches were complementary in achieving overall project outcomes. This evaluation will be used by IOM, UNICEF, MoIS and other interested stakeholders such as UNSOM to: inform related policy debate and the United Nations' political engagement in Somalia; improve the implementation of an ongoing set of activities and projects; document lessons learned and best practices from a completed set of activities; and inform future project development.

METHODOLOGY

2.1 Approach

This evaluation study adopted a qualitative approach to facilitate a deep understanding of the context within which the UNPBF activities took place. The study asked “how,” “why,” and “so what” questions, and explored nuances in the experiences and perceptions of different stakeholder groups. Focus group discussions (FGDs) and KIIs were conducted, with project beneficiaries and the relevant stakeholders as participants. These data collection tools were developed using seven the OECD-DAC evaluation criteria: relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability and cross-cutting issues of gender. Triangulation was used for all areas of focus of the evaluation activities to facilitate validation of data through cross verification from more than two sources. In all phases, a strong participatory approach was applied to ensure maximum engagement of all the relevant stakeholders.

2.2 Data Collection Process

2.2.1 Literature Review

A comprehensive desk review of all relevant literature was conducted. These included project evaluation reports, project results frameworks, evaluation reports and other documents. This review of secondary sources was vital prior to the initiation of actual field work as it partly informed the development of the data collection tools.

2.2.2 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

A purposive sampling technique was used to select FGD participants to ensure the selection of people who were most likely to possess the knowledge, ideas or experiences that were most relevant to the

project. In selecting the participants, the evaluation team observed gender sensitivity and demographic characteristics. To maximize participation among selected respondents, separate FGDs were conducted for female and male participants, each composed of 8-10 individuals and facilitated by two experienced facilitators. A total of 12 FGDs were conducted with marginalized community youth beneficiaries and community members across the three districts: Jowhar, Baidoa and Kismayo (1 FGD for each group per district). In the Beletweyne district, FGDs could not be conducted due to the El Niño flooding that rendered the beneficiary communities displaced, hence making it difficult to access them physically. Alternatively, the evaluation team conducted KIIs through telephone calls for this location.

Table 2 Sample for FGDs

Target Participants	Target District	Number of FGDs
Community members (female)	Jowhar, Baidoa and Kismayo	4
Marginalized community youth (female)		4
Marginalized community youth (male)		4
Total		12

Target District	Target Participant Groups	Number of FGDs
Jowhar	Community members (female) Community members (male) Marginalized community youth (female) Marginalized community youth (male)	4
Baidoa	Community members (female) Community members (male) Marginalized community youth (female) Marginalized community youth (male)	4
Kismayo	Community members (female) Community members (male) Marginalized community youth (female) Marginalized community youth (male)	4
Total		12

2.2.3 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

The study engaged knowledgeable key informants from diverse backgrounds and groups in order to triangulate and enrich the data collected. The study used a semi-structured key informant guide customized for each group of key informants – separate KII guides were developed for community members, project beneficiaries, community leaders, IPs and government stakeholders. The study engaged the selected key informants on in-person interviews after securing meetings with them. At the end of each interview, the interviewer qualitatively coded the information into manageable themes, issues, and recommendations. A total of 64 key informants were interviewed during the evaluation.

Table 3 Sample of KIIs

Key Informants	Number of KIIs
Community leaders (elders)	8
Imams	4
Community advocates engaged during the project implementation	8
YFAWAS	32
Government stakeholders (federal and state levels)	5

IPs	3
IOM/UNICEF staff	2
Total	64

2.2.4 Limitations

Due to the ongoing heavy floods in Beletweyne, the evaluation team could not conduct in-person interviews and FGDs with project beneficiaries in this district. The evaluation team instead conducted all these interviews through telephone calls. The major shortcoming of this approach is not having the personalized interaction that is otherwise possible through a face-to-face interview. In addition, due to the sensitivity of the subject matter and the safety of the respondents, the study did not conduct any FGDs with the direct beneficiaries of the project (i.e., YFAWAS and CAAFAG).

2.3 Evaluation Ethics and Quality Assurance

The implementation of the evaluation adhered to IOM and UNICEF procedures on ethical standards in evaluation in the design, conduct and dissemination of the assignment. The evaluation approach, as well as the data collection and analysis methods, were responsive to human rights, including child rights. Ethical considerations were integral to the whole process of data collection (FGDs and KIIs) and data management during the assignment. The evaluation team provided a clear statement of the purpose of the FGDs and KIIs, allowing participants to make an informed decision. Consent of all the participants was sought prior to interviews/discussions and no one was compelled to participate in FGDs or KIIs, nor were they forced to remain if they wanted to leave. For participants under 18, consent was obtained from their parents/guardians, as well as from the child themselves, prior to the FGD or KII. In line with the principle of benefit, the evaluators ensured that no harm or injury befell the respondents, either through action or omission during the data collection process.

2.4 Data Analysis

The evaluation team ensured that the study’s assessment framework facilitated the collection and analysis of data that was relevant to the questions outlined under each specific evaluation question, and made optimal use of the available data and literature. In terms of data analysis, content analysis was conducted on all FGD and KII transcripts to inform the narrative of the evaluation report. To overcome shortcomings and biases traditionally associated with using individual methods and sources of data, the KIIs and FGDs were carefully balanced against the desk review analysis. The main themes across all the FGDs and KIIs form the key findings for each topic discussed in this evaluation.

FINDINGS

This section presents findings and discusses the results of seven key outcome indicators as reflected in the project results framework. These specifically relate to the project relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability and cross-cutting gender issues. This evaluation also discusses challenges and remaining gaps, lessons learned during implementation of the program, and concrete recommendations for similar future projects.

3.1 Relevance

This criterion assesses the extent to which the objectives of the project were relevant and aligned with the beneficiary needs and the priorities of the Federal Government of Somalia, as well as whether the intervention was in line with IOM/UNICEF policies and thematic priorities.

3.1.1 Alignment with Beneficiary Needs

Overall, the evaluation finds that the portfolios of the UNPBF project have been broadly relevant to the needs of the direct beneficiaries, local communities and overall peacebuilding efforts of the project locations. A key objective of the project was to address one of the most pernicious components of conflict in Somalia – youth recruitment into violent armed groups – through welcoming YFAWAS and CAAFAG and by reducing the potential for future recruitment of young people into such groups. This evaluation notes that reintegration efforts across project locations were based on the growing recognition that preventing recruitment and supporting defection from AS may require new, more diversified, comprehensive, and cost-effective approaches. Therefore, both IOM and UNICEF targeted not only YFAWAS and CAAFAG, but also marginalized children and youth to ensure further involvement with armed groups and recruitment is contained. This strategy was premised on the fact that the drivers for young people to engage in violence are rooted in experiences of injustice, discrimination and marginalization. In alignment with the individual need for significance, many ex-combatants and other children formerly associated with armed groups come from minority clans that perceive themselves to be oppressed by more powerful clans and/or by the government.

“This project’s strategy of recognizing minority youth as people who matter and as people who have a say in the community in terms of participating in local projects is a significant step towards reducing the feeling of marginalization by these specific groups.” – Local administrator in Baidoa

Furthermore, the project exhibited a clear understanding of the intricate challenges associated with reintegrating youth, especially those linked with AS. To address the stigma associated with YFAWAS and CAAFAG, the project Ips in Jowhar, Beletweyne, Kismayo and Baidoa delivered a comprehensive reintegration package that involved physical and emotional safe spaces, psychosocial support, mentorship, vocational trainings, and social and emotional skills trainings. According to the FGDs and KIIs, the beneficiaries expressed their needs and preferences for skills training and psychosocial support as integral steps towards community acceptance. The project addressed these needs by offering practical skills training (e.g., tailoring, electrical work, and phone repair) which were identified as marketable and in-demand skills in the local context. In addition, the project also provided psychosocial support services, such as individual and group counseling, recreational activities, and life skills sessions, to help the beneficiaries cope with their trauma, stress, and integration challenges. Additionally, the project facilitated community-based reintegration mechanisms, such as workshops, awareness raising, and community dialogues, to enhance the understanding and acceptance of the beneficiaries by the local communities, and to foster social cohesion and reconciliation. All these activities have been identified by the beneficiaries themselves and the local communities as relevant to the needs of these young people and children.

“The case management component of the project was particularly handy in helping YFAWAS and CAAFAG to heal and calm their minds down and start on a new slate. This is especially the case because of the exposure to trauma which at times causes them post-traumatic stress disorder.” – IP (INTERSOM) staff in Jowhar

3.1.2 Alignment with IOM/UNICEF, Government and Donor Policies

The project was firmly aligned with and supportive of national strategies as well as UNPBF, IOM and UNICEF guidelines, strategies, and frameworks related to reintegration of youth and children in post-conflict settings, showcasing a clear understanding of and responsiveness to the priorities set forth by the Somali government. The objectives and activities of the project seamlessly integrated with the broader national strategies related to youth empowerment and reintegration. For example, the project followed the IOM Standard Operating Procedures for the Disengagement and Reintegration of YFAWAS and CAAFAG, which provides a comprehensive and holistic approach to reintegration, based on the principles of child protection, best interest of the child, do no harm, and participation. The project was also aligned with the UNICEF Child Protection Strategy and Policy, which promotes a systems approach to child protection, focusing on strengthening the capacities of families, communities, and institutions to prevent and respond to child protection risks and violations.

Similarly, this evaluation learned that the project was implemented in line with the Somali National Programme on the Treatment and Handling of Disengaged Combatants (2013), in close coordination with DRP under MoIS, ensuring age appropriate and gender responsive approaches to reintegration of youth. The project also incorporated other strategic frameworks including the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework for Somalia (2021-2025) (specifically, strategic priority number 2: security and rule of law), the Secretary General’s Peacebuilding Fund Strategy (2020-2024), and UN Security Council Resolutions.

By aligning with the national agenda, the project not only demonstrated relevance but also contributed to the country’s overarching goals of sustainable development, social cohesion, and peacebuilding. The project’s harmonization with national strategies indicated a strategic and collaborative approach, ensuring that interventions were contextualized and that they directly contributed to the country’s efforts to address the challenges of youth associated with YFAWAS. The dedicated efforts of the project team demonstrated a robust commitment to adhering to the principles outlined by these international organizations. The strategies employed not only embraced a comprehensive approach but also conformed to globally recognized standards for youth reintegration.

3.1.3 Project Design

Overall, the project’s objectives were identified as relevant to the country’s current peacebuilding efforts. The localized and community-based implementation strategy for a gender-inclusive approach, both for CAAFAG (under the age of 18) and YFAWAS (aged 18-25) aligns with a more inclusive reintegration rooted in direct interaction between local communities and YFAWAS and CAAFAG. The shift from the traditionally residential reintegration of YFAWAS to a more community-based modality was seen as relevant to the current context of Somalia, and this approach seemed to enhance interaction and social cohesion. The provision of services for both male and female YFAWAS within one non-residential communal space ensured that the safe spaces were gender-sensitive. This meant that male youth had gender-segregated access twice a week, female youth had gender-segregated access twice a week, and both genders could attend joint activities once per week at each safe space.

In addition, the use of community-based grants sponsoring local projects provided an opportunity for interaction between the local communities, marginalized youth and YFAWAS and CAAFAG, creating opportunities for social cohesion and acceptance for these groups. Similarly, the project’s

prioritization of security and reintegration was relevant and timely. It was largely based on community consultations and discussions with strategic peacebuilding stakeholders, and sought to fill gaps in programs and funding in areas critical to sustained peace in the project locations.

The direct implementation of the project activities was also largely carried out by local IPs. In addition, working with MoIS's DRP was a strategic step towards ensuring the success of the project through creating a sense of ownership and participation by key stakeholders. The project also continues to be one of the few interventions that the government has operational ownership over, which provides the prospect of greater sustainability and uptake. The relationship between the IPs and the government counterparts also improved as they worked together on implementing the projects. IP staff actually reported that the UNPBF activities improved working relationships with the government agencies, especially DRP.

"The project has given us the opportunity to work with a diverse set of stakeholders within the security sector of the government, especially the in the Ministry of Internal Security, expanding our connections and networks which will enable us implement similar project smoothly." – IP (Sustainable Development and Reintegration Solutions: SDRS) staff in Baidoa

3.2 Coherence

Overall, the project had both internal and external coherence which was anchored in its design and implementation. Internally, collaborative efforts were evident through coordinated activities, shared resources, and information exchange. The project actively engaged in partnerships and complemented existing initiatives, avoiding duplication and maximizing impact. This collaborative approach allowed for a comprehensive and integrated response to the challenges addressed by IOM, UNICEF, and other stakeholders in the targeted areas. Generally, IOM and UNICEF relied on the IPs' networks to broaden scope of activities and outreach of beneficiary groups at the community level in conflict affected areas.

In terms of external coherence, the project worked closely with the Ministry of Internal Security officials at both state and federal levels, as well as the department of DRP and NISA. Other external partners the project worked with include UNOCT, UNSOM and the Elman Peace Foundation. The close coordination and coherence also enabled the project IPs to strengthen their capacity by sharing and transferring crucial knowledge related to DDDR.

However, despite the collaborative nature of the project, some delays were experienced during the formative stage of project implementation as IOM and UNICEF discussed harmonization of monitoring tools and the theory of change. Project staff observed that extensive consultations were needed to ensure perspectives of both main implementing partners were taken into consideration and that since UNICEF is a child-focused organization, they have a particular responsibility in ensuring that all safeguards are in place when children are involved - thus tools needed to be adapted to not only be child friendly but also to consider the highly vulnerable group of children who have been associated with armed forces and armed groups.

3.3 Effectiveness

Overall, the UNPBF project was successful in contributing to the community acceptance of YFAWAS and CAAFAG, promoting the sustainable reintegration of ex-combatants and youth-at-risk into mainstream society. The project implemented targeted activities to achieve its goals, notably through the establishment of safe spaces, case management and counseling, social connections and mentorship, vocational skills training, social and emotional skills building, and community development grants. Other activities employed to foster acceptance were community-based reintegration mechanisms including workshops, awareness raising community dialogues, as well trainings for the IPs.

The findings of this evaluation indicate that the intervention has been highly effective in achieving its objectives. The project's community initiatives led to successful reintegration of YFAWAS, fostering a sense of ownership and making them integral members embraced by the community. Providing skills development in various areas, literacy programs, and involving them in infrastructure improvements has significantly contributed to the empowerment and successful reintegration of beneficiaries.

3.3.1 Physical and Emotional Safe Spaces

This activity involved the creation of physical and emotional safe environments for YFAWAS who feel stigmatized and rejected by the community. The project provided informal recreation activities in these spaces to help YFAWAS and marginalized community youth relax and feel comfortable. Within the safe spaces, unstructured activities and indoor games such as card games, watching TV programs, and internet services were offered so that beneficiaries could rest and have fun. In addition, within the safe spaces, six-member committees comprising three YFAWAS and three marginalized community youth were formed to conduct monthly meetings. In these meetings, they discussed youth affairs and common challenges, and proposed ideas to inform project implementation.

The implementation of these project activities improved the integration and social cohesion of community members and YFAWAS. The project also improved the skills and knowledge of marginalized community youth and YFAWAS, making it easier for them to positively contribute to the community. Similarly, according to the respondents the negative perception towards YFAWAS has reduced, and they were fully integrated into the communities. The involvement of different sectors of community members facilitated the successful implementation of all the project activities showing a top-level satisfaction from the beneficiaries.

"I didn't think I will get all this help after coming out from AS. Currently I have called out more than 12 youths associated with AS to come out and benefit from this program." – Male YFAWAS in Baidoa

3.3.2 Case Management and Counseling

YFAWAS and CAAFAG are generally subject to varying degrees of trauma during their time with these groups, and stigmatization upon return to their communities. Through dedicated social workers, the project provided psychosocial support services, such as individual and group counseling, recreational activities like football tournaments, and life skills sessions, to help the beneficiaries cope with their trauma, stress, and challenges. The caseworkers also provided guidance and linkages to job opportunities, and made referrals to protection or medical units for further support. The beneficiaries generally developed a good rapport with their caseworkers, thus promoting their self-esteem and confidence.

In general, participants described the experience with the mentorship as "transformative", reporting that these relationships enabled deeper reflections around their individual role in peacebuilding and ensuring that more youth abandon violent ideas. Most participants in the interviews asserted experiencing a shift in their pre-conceived ideas and the narratives they held that they identified as promoting stigmatization or alienation of other people based on their background. Others noted that the caseworkers' psychosocial support enabled them to accept that life outside participation in violence is much better than living under the AS.

"I used to have bad dreams and memories which really stressed me and gave me nightmares. With the support of the caseworkers and intensive sessions on mental health support, I am now recovering well." – Male YFAWAS in Kismayo

3.3.3 Social Connections and Mentorship

The project acknowledged that YFAWAS and CAAFAG are essentially persons who are new to their current locations and hence require social connections and mentorship to feel comfortable in their new locations. Therefore, to avoid recidivism and reduce the risk of them joining social groups that may negatively influence them, the project team provided mentorship by the DRR programme graduates, community champions, sports coaches, and guardians/community advocates who are respected figures in the community. These figures played a core role in advocating for the welfare of the youth by providing guidance, mentoring and protection from stigma and discrimination.

In addition, the IPs organized peer-to-peer support structures by offering joint services to YFAWAS together with marginalized community youth. Specifically, youth champions held sessions with the beneficiaries and supported them through advocacy, protection against stigma and discrimination, as well as guidance and mentoring.

This evaluation observes that this peer-to-peer support was an important element of social reintegration for YFAWAS, as it created meaningful relationships in a non-threatening environment with community members. The social cohesion and mentorship activity created opportunities for community youth, who in the context of Somalia have been exposed to decades of violence, to receive psychosocial support. For many, this was their first ever exposure to such supportive, safe environments and growth opportunities. The accounts from their experiences with the social connections and mentorships reflect changes in the strengthening of relations with people in their communities and increased openness to talk about their histories and grievances from the violent events that they witnessed or experienced in the past. Their stories also demonstrate increased empathy towards others who have suffered similar events, creating new meanings for the collective.

“Our interactions with the mentors were very helpful as we opened up on a lot of our past misdeeds that haunted some of us. What struck me most was that our revelations of such deeds were received with a welcoming mind that made me change my mindset. I now know that I am dealing with a community that is ready to forgive us so long we are back on right track.” – Female YFAWAS in Baidoa

3.3.4 Vocational Skills Training

The project offered practical skills training in tailoring, electrical, welding and phone repair etc., which were identified as marketable and in-demand skills in the local context. The project also provided the beneficiaries with startup kits (for beneficiaries in Jowhar and Beletweyene) and linkages to local markets and employers. The literacy program has emerged as a transformative force, positively impacting many lives by equipping individuals with valuable skills. The community has witnessed the tangible benefits as numerous graduates have successfully established businesses and applied their skills for the betterment of the community. This success has generated a strong desire among community members for the program to be expanded, reflecting a collective eagerness for everyone to have the opportunity to acquire essential skills. Additionally, the project conducted pre- and post-training assessments to measure the improvement of the beneficiaries’ skills and knowledge which demonstrated tangible upskilling. Interviews with beneficiaries of the vocational skills trainings also revealed that a number of them have now started operating small businesses that support their livelihoods. However, some of these youth mentioned that they faced some challenges in their formative months of startup as they struggled with finding enough capital to cover their costs, which forced some to abandon their businesses.

“The vocational skills support has helped us a lot and many of us have started up small businesses to support ourselves and our families, however, a few dropped their startups due to hard economic times after their shops failed to kick off well because of inability to pay rent and other miscellaneous expenses.” –Male YFAWAS in Kismayo

3.3.5 Social and Emotional Skills Building

One of the key activities of the project was building social and emotional skills for enhanced social cohesion. These activities were delivered in the form of capacity building for the beneficiaries through improving their individual skills such as self-awareness, self-esteem, empathy, and positive attitude as well as interpersonal problem-solving skills such as communication, emotional regulation, leadership. This was combined with recreation and spiritual activities such as sports, arts, religious counselling etc. Religious counseling sessions were normally conducted on Mondays and Thursdays every week; however, beneficiaries were also able to come in for individual sessions at any time of the week. The religious counsellor equipped the project beneficiaries with basic Islamic teachings on various themes to enable them to understand the religion better as this promoted spiritual healing and improved the wellbeing of the beneficiaries. Counselors achieved this by sharing their knowledge with the beneficiaries and counseling them on specific themes, referencing the Quranic verses and hadiths and giving the beneficiaries the opportunity to ask questions on these topics and seek clarifications where needed. Through the religious counselling sessions, YFAWAS were able to reverse their misinterpreted teachings of Islam and to change their behaviour as they reintegrated into the community peacefully.

“The sheikhs gave us sermons that demystified a number of aspects that we previously understood otherwise. There is a general feeling amongst the youth that misinterpretation of Islamic teachings led to many others who are now in the AS zones – I wish those ones get the opportunity to be corrected.” – Female CAAFAG in Jowhar

The arts-based activities included poetry classes and drawing/numeracy skills. Poetry classes were taught based on four main themes: identity and belonging, trust and understanding, empathy and acceptance, and forgiveness and reconciliation. The beneficiaries were taught poetry skills to the point that they were able to compose their own poems in which they expressed their thoughts and feelings. They even recited their poems in social cohesion events where community members were invited, thus changing community perceptions, reducing the mistrust between the beneficiaries and the rest of the community and promoting community acceptance of YFAWAS. The beneficiaries were also taught artistic drawing skills/numeracy to nurture their creativity and reduce stress.

Football training was also provided by the sport coaches through theoretical and practical sessions. The beneficiaries were trained on different footballing skills including dynamic warm up exercises, strength training exercises like squats and push-ups to improve their physical fitness. The frequent engagement of the youth in these sports activities enabled them to put aside their worries and concentrate on the task at hand thus improving mental health issues like depression and stress, as well as increasing their confidence and self-esteem. The beneficiaries' football team also played football games with other local community football teams from the target locations in order to strengthen peer-to-peer relations and promote social connections.

3.3.6 Community Development Grants

IOM and UNICEF provided small grants for the implementation of community development projects (ranging between US\$ 1,500 and US\$ 5,000 per project) through inclusive civic engagement and community consultations for the selection of the small-scale projects to be funded. These grants aimed to transform the community through promoting meaningful participation of youth in the process of identifying needs in the community, collective decision making and project implementation. Through KIIs and FGDs, participants maintained that this activity improved social cohesion, and provided youth with an opportunity to meaningfully contribute to their communities. In Kismayo, projects covered under this activity involved the rehabilitation of 10 latrines in the five project locations, rehabilitation of Madrassa, distribution of 720 rain protection sheets to vulnerable camp residents and distribution of 245 mosquito nets. In Baidoa, the grants funded road clearance activities, rehabilitation of mosques, distribution of school desks, construction of a bridge, and more.

The project activities were implemented through a participatory methodology where all the existing community structures such as community elders, village committees, IDP camp leaders and religious leaders were all included in the mobilization activity in order to ensure community participation and ownership of the project. The implementation process for these projects included various stages. The community members were first mobilized and informed of the scope of the project activities. An introduction event was then held where community development committees (CDCs) were introduced to the participants. The CDCs were drawn from all segments (marginalized youth, women, men etc.) of the community as well as the YFAWAS representatives which offered an opportunity to promote interaction between this group and the community, further enhancing reintegration – the membership of the CDCs ranged from 5 -7 members. Next, project preparation events were held as the community members proposed project ideas based on the community's priorities and needs. Finally, in each location the selected project ideas were voted for and the project idea that emerged the winner was implemented by the community with the help of the CDCs.

The CDCs also mobilized other YFAWAS from the safe spaces to join and support in the implementation of these projects, and this has created a bond between YFAWAS and the community. Community perceptions on YFAWAS have changed positively through these projects, promoting community acceptance. Additionally, the community's appreciation for the improved infrastructure, such as rehabilitated feeder roads and well-furnished classrooms, underscores the tangible and lasting positive impacts of the project on the overall well-being of the community. In Baidoa, for example, a small bridge was constructed, serving as a crucial crossing point for residents and withstanding heavy floods in the area. Moreover, two feeder roads underwent rehabilitation and bush clearing, enhancing accessibility for the community.

“The construction pit latrines have addressed the critical needs of the camp residents as the previously existing latrines were filled up which forced children to practice open defecation hence resulting in the outbreak of water/air borne diseases.” –Female community advocate respondent from Beletweyne

3.3.7 Trainings for IPs

The project also successfully facilitated capacity building for the IPs – INTERSOM and DRP – to enable the sustainability and expansion of youth empowerment interventions. Several capacity building workshops on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services (MHPSS) were organized with the project's support. IPs further highlighted that they were trained on World Health Organization (WHO)'s Five Well-being Index, and INTERSOM project staff reported that UNICEF engaged the Elman Peace Foundation to support them with providing mental health and psychosocial support. However, while the IPs appreciated the training support offered, they noted that it was not adequate considering the scope of work of the project which was diverse and not only limited to mental health support.

3.4 Efficiency

The efficiency indicator regards the extent to which the project objectives and sub-objectives were achieved within the stipulated timeframe; whether the available technical and financial resources were adequate to fulfill the project outcomes; and whether the project management, coordination, and monitoring were efficient and appropriate for the intervention. Overall, the project proposal's planned outputs and outcomes have been largely fulfilled, with nearly all the targets achieved within the stipulated timeframe, including the enrolment of the target beneficiaries. However, some gaps emerged as a few beneficiaries dropped out temporarily, citing engagement in casual jobs elsewhere, only to later return and express their commitment to the project. This was particularly mentioned by interviewed YFAWAS and community members in Baidoa. Despite these challenges, the project has made substantial progress in meeting its intended objectives.

At project implementation level, the choice of working through experienced local CSOs and line ministries as IPs was seen as an efficient way of project delivery in a context where security concerns are common in the project operational areas. While this approach was based on the community-based implementation approach with a view to promoting ownership by local communities and the government, the evaluation saw it as an efficient and contextually relevant modality. Project stakeholders actually argued that if the project adopted a residential reintegration method, more resources would have been spent on boarding facilities – they provided examples of successful efforts to improve the efficiency or “value for money” of activities citing that the community-based approach was an efficient and less costly intervention. Furthermore, the structure of administering such sensitive project through local CSOs saved security and other related costs. Other factors that also contributed to the project efficiency include deployment of qualified staff who delivered project activities on time.

Regarding availability and adequacy of technical and financial resources, the project was efficient in using the available resources to achieve the desired results. The project management, coordination, monitoring, and reporting was all perceived by various stakeholders as efficient and appropriate for the intervention. The project had a clear and effective management and coordination structure, involving IOM, UNICEF, IPs and other partners, and ensured regular and timely communication, consultation, and feedback among them. However, interviews with project staff revealed several predictable and preventable operational challenges in relation to implementation as well as monitoring and evaluation, that could have been mitigated with better planning. For instance, as mentioned, there was some delays experienced at the start of the project implementation as IOM and UNICEF discussed harmonization of monitoring tools and the theory of change. But project staff observed that this is often a normal part of project design, as there was need to ensure all perspectives were taken into consideration and that since UNICEF is a child-focused organization, they have a particular responsibility in ensuring that all safeguards are in place when children are involved.

3.5 Impact

This evaluation examined the changes made in the lives of the beneficiary groups. According to available evidence, the project has in general produced the expected and desired outcomes and impacts. Analysis shows that stakeholder responses to the project’s early impacts were overwhelmingly positive, as they strongly agree that the intervention has benefited the target populations, and was complementing government priorities. Interviews with stakeholders and discussions with the beneficiary communities also confirm this conclusion. They acknowledged that the project’s impact on the community has been widely appreciated, and the project has proven to be a valuable resource for YFAWAS and CAAFAG seeking reintegration support.

The impact on peacebuilding efforts, especially the increased acceptance and reintegration of youth, stands out as a significant positive outcome. Stakeholders concurred that the project has created lasting changes, particularly in skills development, community acceptance, and infrastructure development, laying the foundation for sustained positive impacts. Overall, this evaluation notes that the project had the following impacts: improved social cohesion, reintegration of YFAWAS and CAAFAG, enhanced vocational skills, and provision of economic assistance to beneficiaries.

3.5.1 Reintegration of YFAWAS and CAAFAG

The most significant impact of the project, particularly in the realm of peacebuilding, is the successful reintegration of YFAWAS. Graduates of the reintegration support program now feel a sense of belonging within their communities, marking a crucial achievement for the project. Although initial acceptance by the community posed challenges, over time, these youths have seamlessly become integrated members, with reduced instances of discrimination or stigma. This achievement is evidenced by no reported cases of recidivism, and stands out as a substantial positive effect of the

project, underscoring the project's pivotal role in fostering harmony and acceptance within the community.

The project facilitated community-based reintegration mechanisms through creating physical and emotional safe spaces, social connections and mentorship, social and emotional skills building, and participatory community development projects. Through these activities, IPs conducted workshops, awareness raising sessions, and community dialogues, to enhance the acceptance of the beneficiaries by the local communities, to foster social cohesion, and to complete reintegration of YFAWAS and CAAFAG. The sentiment within the general community showed that community members and leaders expressed positive views and support for the project and the direct beneficiaries. The successful reintegration of YFAWAS has been acknowledged as a crucial milestone, with community members applauding the warm reception extended to these individuals. This acceptance has not only fostered a sense of belonging but has also inspired the youth to encourage their friends in AS to join the rehabilitation efforts. This ripple effect is evident in the increasing number of women who are shunning away being associated with AS and hence moving to government-controlled areas and participating in rehabilitation centers, showcasing the project's positive influence on individuals' choices and behaviours.

"The level of community acceptance of YFAWAS here in Kismayo is a significant indicator of successful reintegration as there is a general feeling of increased safety in interacting and dealing with these people, especially when you look into their dark and sad past with the AS that has caused us so much pain." – Elder in Kismayo

Successful reintegration of youth and children has had the positive result of contributing to the prevention and countering of joining armed groups and the promotion of peace and security in the project locations. This has been achieved by addressing the root drivers of radicalization and recruitment of youth into AS, and providing these youth with alternative pathways and opportunities. The FGDs and KIIs – carried out to assess changes in attitudes and behaviours, including trust, cooperation and participation of the beneficiaries – showed that YFAWAS, CAAFAG and marginalized youth developed more positive and constructive attitudes and behaviours over the course of the project, such as rejecting violence, resolving conflicts peacefully, and engaging in civic and social activities.

"The project addressed the needs of the youth and provided training that is beneficial to them in terms of employment and to the larger community of Jowhar District and thus prevented violent extremism and insecurity." – Community leader in Jowhar

3.5.2 Increased social cohesion

The project's most impactful contribution to peacebuilding lies in its successes in mobilization and creating awareness, particularly in terms of increased community acceptance and reintegration of YFAWAS. The efforts invested in mobilizing and awareness raising have played a pivotal role in fostering understanding and acceptance. By engaging in comprehensive awareness campaigns, the project effectively addressed initial challenges and prejudices, facilitating a positive environment for the reintegration of youth.

The project's reintegration efforts have successfully cultivated a harmonious and friendly community where individuals coexist peacefully without suspicion. Interviews and discussions with beneficiary YFAWAS and CAAFAG showed that, on average, many individuals from these groups now feel themselves to be an integral part of the community, experiencing acceptance without any reported stigma across all the project locations – a noteworthy success of the project. Community members observed that graduates have been taught to live in peace and harmony with residents of their "new homes". They further observed that project activities enabled these groups to freely mingle with local community members who would otherwise have been suspicious of them, hence creating a sense of

trust and confidence. FGD participants particularly pointed out that the social cohesion component has increased resilience and prevention of relapse and recruitment of youth into AS by addressing the root causes and drivers of violence and susceptibility to joining an armed group particularly AS, and by providing them with alternative pathways and opportunities. Through the safe spaces and mental health support, the project strengthened their coping skills, positive values, and critical thinking, and reduced their vulnerability and susceptibility to violent ideologies and narratives. The project also increased their awareness and knowledge of the risks and consequences of joining AS, and the benefits and opportunities of leaving the armed groups.

“Because of the social cohesion and high level of interaction with these youth and children, we have never encountered any case of retribution or recidivism since the project started. All this points to evidence of increased trust and social cohesion among the local community on one side and these new people who returned from AS.” – Elder in Baidoa

Similarly, the project increased trust and cohesion among different groups and stakeholders, by facilitating dialogue, interaction, and cooperation among them. This reduced the tensions and conflicts among these actors, especially among the local community, local IPs, the government, and other institutions, and improved the governance and service delivery in the target areas. The project created a platform for sharing information, knowledge, and learning among these actors.

3.5.3 Community Infrastructure

Through the community development grants, the project implemented infrastructure activities identified by the local communities and YFAWAS/CAAFAG as being a priority for them, and then voted on by the whole community in participatory processes. This had the dual benefit of promoting interaction between the local community and YFAWAS, and helping in the establishment of key infrastructure developments, such as the bridges, which has markedly improved community mobility. Residents in project locations observed that the bridges facilitate the movement of people, animals, and vehicles, enhancing overall connectivity and accessibility in the area. In Jowhar, community members indicated that the provision of furniture for two classrooms and the equipping of youth offices with chairs and essential equipment further contributed to the creation of functional and comfortable learning and working environments, reinforcing the positive impact of the project on the community’s well-being. Community members further noted that the projects funded through the community development grants contributed to national development and stability. The project also enhanced the capacity and commitment of the government and other institutions to address the needs and challenges of the youth and the communities, and to ensure the sustainability and quality of the reintegration and peacebuilding services and structures.

“The individuals whom the community only knew as defectors and avoided associating with are now implementing projects and supporting the community hence triggered the change of perception and community acceptance.” – Elder in Kismayo

3.5.4 Economic Assistance through Vocational Trainings

The project increased access to opportunities for youth to meaningfully contribute to their communities, by providing them with skills training, psychosocial support, and community acceptance. The project also improved their livelihood prospects, well-being, and social inclusion, empowering them to become positive agents of change and peacebuilding, and to engage in civic and social activities. The skill development initiatives, spanning various areas such as cooking, tailoring, artistic endeavors like henna art, computers, and literacy skills in reading and writing Somali, have significantly transformed the lives of the graduates. Many now operate their own businesses, while others contribute as semi-skilled workers, thereby positively impacting not only their own but also their families’ well-being by ensuring a steady income with which to put food on the table. These

initiatives have equipped the beneficiaries with valuable skills and knowledge, contributing to their overall empowerment and successful reintegration into the community.

“Vulnerable youth who never had the opportunity to learn the various skills that were offered in the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) were given extensive training on courses of their choice and gained profitable market skills which can create job opportunities for them and improve their livelihoods.” – Female community member from Beletweyne

The target beneficiaries expressed high satisfaction with the services provided, commending the invaluable support that enabled them to acquire essential skills for self-sufficiency. Their positive feedback reflects the success of the project in meeting their needs and aspirations. It is noteworthy that some of the beneficiaries are eager to take the next step in their entrepreneurial journey and have voiced a sincere request for capital to kickstart their own businesses. This entrepreneurial enthusiasm was an unexpected but welcome outcome, and is a testament to the project’s success in empowering youth and creating a strong foundation for future endeavors. The appreciation and feedback from the beneficiaries highlight the meaningful impact of the project on their lives, and the development of their aspirations for self-reliance.

Youth beneficiaries who graduated from the program were able to successfully transition towards securing livelihoods and reintegrating into society. However, it is important to note that the project did not include the provision of business startup capital for project beneficiaries which could have increased successful achievement of the project goals. Other interviewed beneficiaries mentioned that the vocational skills training activity did not offer diverse enough courses which led to some youth taking courses they were not passionate about.

3.6 Sustainability

This evaluation analyzed the extension of the project’s benefits in terms of sustainability, and examined if the results of the implemented activities are likely to last after the closeout of the intervention. Significant long-term changes resulting from the project are evident. The skills imparted to the beneficiaries stand out as enduring assets, contributing to sustainable livelihoods and economic empowerment within the community. The heightened awareness generated through targeted community engagement has fostered lasting understanding and acceptance, particularly concerning the reintegration of YFAWAS. Moreover, the construction of infrastructure such as the bridge in Baidoa, represents a lasting change in community connectivity and accessibility. These tangible and enduring outcomes underscore the project’s success in not only meeting its immediate objectives but also in laying the foundation for sustained positive impact within the community over the long term.

Similarly, there is now long-term community social cohesion and community acceptance of YFAWAS and as well as enhanced government capacity to continue to support disengagement from AS. From a local sustainability perspective, the project being implemented through local organizations built the capacity of local infrastructures in social cohesion methodologies to continue providing these services within the community after project end. Additionally, the youth-led community development activities will remain in place. Furthermore, at the individual, community, and societal levels, the project has demonstrated enduring changes, both intended and unintended. For instance, there is evidence that the project will prevent the recruitment of youth into AS on a long-term basis. By addressing root causes, providing alternatives, and enhancing coping skills, the project has increased youth resilience and reduced their vulnerability and susceptibility to joining armed groups. Also, of important to note is the high prospect for sustainability associated with the project implementation modality where stakeholders highlighted that the community-based reintegration initiative presents a more sustainable reintegration results for persons formerly associated with armed groups. According to interviewed beneficiaries, IPs and government stakeholders, the

community-based modality has a more buy-in and ownership for both the direct beneficiaries and the local communities. They further added that this modality is less costly and offers value for money for donors as well as the government of Somalia.

Nevertheless, this evaluation notes that while the relevant government authorities exhibit commitment to maintaining project benefits, there is need for additional support. Challenges include financial and technical constraints, necessitating collaborative efforts to overcome obstacles. The relevant government authorities, both at the state and federal levels, currently lack the necessary capacity, both financial and technical. The deficiency in resources and poses significant challenges to the sustainability of the project's outcomes. Additional support and resources are crucially needed to bridge this gap and ensure the continued success and impact of the project. Overcoming these obstacles will require concerted efforts to garner support and commitment from the government, community and relevant organizations to secure the long-term benefits and positive changes brought about by the project.

3.7 Cross-Cutting Issues of Gender

In fragile contexts such as that of Somalia, the experiences of women, girls, men and boys can be quite different. In this regard, the design and implementation of the project need to consciously integrate gender issues in part because of existing gender inequalities. The project directly or indirectly mainstreamed cross-cutting issues of gender, protection, disaster risk reduction, conflict, and capacity building. The project design also emphasizes the inclusion of women in the targeting and participation in project activities, as women represent the vulnerable and because the prevailing gender disparities in Somalia requires this focus.

The project's focus on supporting both male and female within communities has proven to be an effective strategy for promoting social development among vulnerable populations in a gender-focused approach in the project areas. Throughout the implementation, there was a commitment to promoting gender equality, and steps were taken to integrate inclusive practices that acknowledged and responded to the diverse roles and experiences of individuals based on their gender. This approach not only contributed to the project's effectiveness but also fostered a more equitable and inclusive impact within the targeted communities. Females emerged as primary beneficiaries, particularly in programs tailored to activities traditionally associated with women, such as tailoring and henna. Moreover, given that a significant number of female participants were those who had defected from AS, the project's deliberate focus on addressing gender-specific needs and challenges resulted in concrete contributions to fostering equality and enhancing the empowerment of girls within the project's scope.

Likewise, the initiative of providing training and skills development opportunities across genders has enabled women to empower themselves and their communities, both during and beyond the program's duration. Specifically, these newly-acquired skills have enabled women to earn a livelihood, support their families, and serve as trainers for others seeking similar vocations in the future. For example, those who graduated from the vocational skills programs have started salon and henna centers to improve their livelihoods and enhance their reintegration into their local communities. Similarly, the case management and mental health support activities provided much-needed psychosocial support to victims of gender-based violence, allowing more women and girls to come forward and report all gender-related issues, including violence or discrimination, facing them.

However, the evaluation identified contextual constraints in relation to gender equality and the way in which women and girls experience conflict and peacebuilding and the challenges facing girls and women in the communities most impacted by conflict and violence. From the interviews, while there were improvements in addressing the needs of women, youth and other vulnerable populations, there is still much more that can be done to improve the participation of more women in such

projects. For instance, the caseload for women beneficiaries were lower than their male counterparts, despite the equal need for reintegration support across gender - the total number of CAAFAG referred/supported over the past 2 years, females make around 15% of the total caseloads, signifying there are more male CAAFAG than female.

3.8 Lessons Learned and Good Practices

1. Community-based reintegration initiative in comparison with the traditional residential rehabilitation modality is a more viable, less costly method, more sustainable and comparatively offers value for money.
2. Skills development is pivotal in empowering vocational skills graduates for sustainable livelihoods, as evidenced by their improved capabilities and independent employment.
3. Different stakeholders, particularly government agencies, local communities and CSOs, can actually work together and deliver joint implementation of sensitive projects such as DDDR.
4. Communities in the project locations are willing and ready to welcome YFAWAS and CAAFAG, despite the dark past of these groups.
5. To recognize the diverse interests of individuals, it is necessary to offer a wide range of vocational courses, to allow beneficiaries to choose programs aligned with their preferences.
6. Incentives are important, especially in ensuring optimal class attendance among adult beneficiaries who require compensation for their time commitment.
7. There is a critical need for broader awareness campaigns to enhance reintegration efforts, campaigns that emphasize the community's welcoming nature and encourage more individuals to voluntarily disengage from AS.
8. Stakeholders learned about the potential for refining future initiatives in youth reintegration, emphasizing tailored skill development, incentivized learning, and community awareness as integral components of successful interventions.
9. Mentorship and religious counselling can have a positive influence on youth who were formerly associated with AS.
10. Skills offered in safe spaces create useful opportunities for social interaction among YFAWAS, marginalized community youth and other community members.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusions

The overarching goal of the project was to facilitate the reintegration of YFAWAS and CAAFAG into the society, utilizing a community-centered approach. The findings of the study indicate that the intervention has been highly effective in achieving its objectives. Challenges such as lack of startup capital and coordination challenges between IOM and UNICEF were identified.

However, on the whole, the combination of skills development, psychosocial support, and community grants has yielded significant results. This approach has instilled a sense of belief and empowerment in the youth, fostering the idea that they can contribute meaningfully to themselves and their community without constant reliance on external agencies and organizations. The project's community initiatives have not only developed a sense of ownership among YFAWAS but has also made them integral members embraced by the community. The impact on peacebuilding stands out as a significant positive outcome. The project has created lasting changes, particularly in skills development, community acceptance, and infrastructure development, laying the foundation for sustained positive impacts.

4.2 Recommendations

1. Increase coverage and targeting as there is a huge gap between the number of beneficiaries vis-a-vis the need. There are an increasing number of men, women and children that are in need of DDDR services.
2. Develop a post-reintegration economic assistance and follow-up plan for those who graduate from the DDDR program. While the project offered vocational skills trainings, there is still a need to support the graduates with startup capital and grants to cover rental expenses and other incentives for a period of six months to avoid early drop out. Incorporating incentives during the learning period is crucial as it plays a pivotal role in ensuring learners prioritize their classes over casual job opportunities.
3. Train communities and mentors on ways to track, monitor, and treat YFAWAS and CAAFAG to ensure a more sustainable social cohesion for graduates of reintegration programs. This can be achieved through inclusive and participatory DDDR community planning
4. IOM and UNICEF should advocate for the decreased use of residential reintegration and promote the adoption of community-based reintegration supports. This stems from stakeholders' arguments that it is less costly to implement community-based reintegration, hence value for money
5. Expand access to psychosocial support and mentorship. One of the most impactful activities of the project was the case management and counselling activities, which helped many YFAWAS and CAAFAG to fully reintegrate. Therefore, implementing more of these activities is highly recommended by project stakeholders, especially local elders and the staff of IPs.
6. Expand timeframes for reintegration programming for YFAWAS and CAAFAG. In the context of Somalia, characterized by long and devastating conflict and armed groups, addressing root causes of violence and susceptibility to joining armed groups is a long-term effort, hence the need to consider expanding such projects to multi-year interventions.
7. Expand the age bracket to 35 years. The current age criterion has presented a substantial challenge, given its initial specification of 14-25 years. Numerous instances have been observed where individuals above this age bracket are unable to participate in the project, even though they would likely benefit from it.

8. Allow beneficiaries to choose their learning paths. Providing a diverse range of options ensures that individuals can pursue subjects that align with their personal and professional aspirations.

ANNEX

5.1 Evaluation Matrix

Evaluation Criteria	Evaluation Questions	Sources of Evidence	Data Collection Instruments
Relevance	<p>Is the intervention in line with project objectives? <i>Alignment with policies and guidelines of IOM, the government, and donors</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Were the project objectives and implementation strategies consistent with and supportive of relevant IOM and UNICEF policies, the Paris Principle and relevant guidelines, strategies, and frameworks related to CAAFAG youth reintegration? • Was the project aligned with and supportive of national strategies? <p><i>Beneficiaries' needs</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent did the project respond to the needs of the beneficiaries (i.e., YFAWAS and marginalized community youth)? • To what extent did the project support non-stigmatizing, age-appropriate, gender transformative community-based reintegration? <p><i>Project design</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Were the activities and outputs consistent with the overall objectives of the DDRR program and UNICEF reintegration policy? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FGDs with community members and marginalized community youth • KII with community leaders (elders, imams, community advocates), YFAWAS, government stakeholders, IPs, IOM/UNICEF staff, and donor representative • Review of existing documents (UNICEF, IOM strategies, positions papers, assessments) • Review of project documents (joint partner reviews, progress reports, project amendments, donor proposals, project agreement and IP reports) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FGD guide • KII guide • Quantitative and qualitative analysis from review of literature and project reports
Coherence	<p>How well does the intervention fit? <i>Internal coherence</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent did the project's intervention synergize and interlink with other interventions implemented by IOM, UNICEF and other actors in the targeted geographical areas? <p><i>External coherence</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent did the project's intervention synergize and interlink with guidelines, standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • KII with government stakeholders, IPs, IOM/UNICEF staff and donor representative • Review of project documents (joint partner reviews, progress reports, project amendments, donor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • KII guide • Quantitative and qualitative analysis from review of literature and project reports

	and interventions of the government and the donor community?	proposals, project agreement and IP reports)	
Effectiveness	<p>Is the intervention achieving its objectives?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Were the planned outputs and outcomes in the project proposal fully achieved overall? How did IOM and UNICEF contribute to achieving overall outputs and outcomes in line with their geographical focus and technical approaches? If there were any gaps, what were the reasons for them? • What internal and external factors/enablers facilitated full achievement of project outputs/outcomes? • With reference to the project’s results framework, has the quality and quantity of the outputs/outcomes been satisfactory? • Were the target beneficiaries satisfied with the services provided? • Were there any factors that prevented beneficiaries from accessing the services and products? • What other actions/ interventions should have been considered during the implementation of the project to increase the effectiveness of the achievements? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FGDs with community members and marginalized community youth • KII with community leaders (elders, imams, community advocates), YFAWAS, government stakeholders, IPs, IOM/UNICEF staff and donor representative • Review of existing documents (UNICEF, IOM strategies, positions papers, assessments) • Review of project documents (joint partner reviews, progress reports, project amendments, donor proposals, project agreement and IP reports) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FGD guide • KII guide • Quantitative and qualitative analysis from review of literature and project reports
Efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How well are resources being used? • Was the project management, coordination, monitoring, reporting, knowledge management, and learning efficient and appropriate for the intervention? • Were the available technical and financial resources adequate to fulfill the project outcomes? • Were the project’s activities/operations in line with the schedule of activities as defined by the project team and work plans? What were the hindering or facilitating factors? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of project documents (budgets allocations, project documents, amendments) • Review of project strategy • KII with IOM/UNICEF staff and donor representative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • KII guide • Qualitative analysis • Budget analysis

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How did the collaboration between IOM and UNICEF contribute to the efficiency of the project, also considering the complementarity of their geographical and thematic/technical focus? 		
Impact	<p>What difference does the intervention make?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Which positive/negative and intended/unintended effects were being produced by the project at large, specifically with regards to peacebuilding impact (considered as critical for this evaluation): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outcome 1– Evaluate which peacebuilding impact the project had in terms of increased community acceptance and reintegration of YFAWAS. Outcome 2 – Evaluate which peacebuilding impact the project had in terms of increased access to opportunities to meaningfully contribute to their communities for marginalized community youth. To what extent can long-term changes be observed (whether intended or unintended, positive, or negative), particularly in relation to the project’s objectives? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FGDs with marginalized community youth KII with YFAWAS, IPs, IOM/UNICEF staff Review of project documents (joint partner reviews, progress reports, project amendments, donor proposals, project agreement and IP reports) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FGD guide KII guide Quantitative and qualitative analysis from review of literature and project reports
Sustainability	<p>Will the benefits last?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent can long-term changes be observed (whether intended or unintended, positive or negative), particularly in relation to the project’s objectives? Do the relevant government authorities have capacity (financial and technical) and are they committed to maintaining the benefits of the projects? What additional support or resources may be needed and what obstacles exist in this regard? To what extent did the project support and strengthen community-based child protection structures and services for child protection? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FGDs with marginalized community youth KII with YFAWAS, government stakeholders, IPs, IOM/UNICEF staff Review of project documents (joint partner reviews, progress reports, project amendments, donor proposals, project agreement and IP reports) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FGD guide KII guide Quantitative and qualitative analysis from review of literature and project reports

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the project benefit from the capacity of the partners and stakeholders? Did it contribute to improve it? • Did the project serve to pilot a community-based reintegration modality to tackle youth engagement in AS to provide a strong entry point for catalytic results and future funding opportunities? Did the project successfully advocate for a shift towards non-residential approaches that increase the number of beneficiaries served? Did it help UNICEF and IOM to explore different methodologies and approaches (compared to previous programming) that will help improve programming in the future? 		
<p>Cross-cutting issues of gender</p>	<p>Were gender aspects taken into account?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent was a gender-sensitive approach used in the design and implementation of the project? • To what extent did the project contribute to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • KII with government stakeholders, IPs, IOM/UNICEF staff and donor representative • Review of project documents (joint partner reviews, progress reports, project amendments, donor proposals, project agreement and IP reports) 	