GICHD Insights

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN MINE ACTION

Evidence from Colombia, Somalia, and Ukraine

ABOUT THIS SERIES

This brief is one of three complementary publications examining the relationship between youth, peace, and security (YPS) and mine action. Together, they consider the evidence for youth engagement in mine action, opportunities to strengthen the integration of mine action within YPS policy frameworks, and the role of national mine action institutions in enabling meaningful youth participation.

This evidence brief, *Youth Engagement in Mine Action: Evidence from Colombia, Somalia, and Ukraine*, provides the evidence base for the series. Drawing on research and experiences from the three countries, it examines how young people are already contributing to mine action, the conditions that enable meaningful participation and leadership, and the barriers that continue to limit opportunities and influence.

Mine Action and Youth, Peace, and Security: Practical Guidance for Integrating Mine Action into Youth, Peace, and Security National Action Plans translates this evidence into practical guidance for governments and YPS stakeholders on recognizing the implications of explosive ordnance contamination for young people and integrating mine action into YPS policy frameworks and the development and implementation of YPS National Action Plans.[1]

Enabling Meaningful Youth Engagement in Mine Action: Practical Guidance for National Mine Action Authorities and National Mine Action Centres focuses on how national mine action institutions can use their existing mandates and functions to create an enabling environment for meaningful, inclusive, and sustainable youth engagement within national mine action programmes.[2]



Participants in the YPS and Mine Action workshop, Bogota, November 2025 © CCCM



A participant during a session of the YPS and Mine Action Workshop in Colombia, November 2025 © CCCM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Drawing on qualitative research and case studies from Colombia, Somalia, and Ukraine, this paper examines how young people contribute to mine action and the factors that enable meaningful participation and leadership. The case of Somalia illustrates participation in post-clearance recovery; that of Colombia explores community engagement and pathways into professional roles; and that of Ukraine examines youth-centred explosive ordnance risk education (EORE) and the distinction between participation and influence.

The evidence highlights six principal findings:

- Young people are not only beneficiaries of mine action. Their knowledge, skills, and networks can also make programmes more relevant, accessible, and responsive.
- Participation does not automatically translate into influence, decision-making authority, or leadership.
- Leadership develops through ongoing mentoring, skills development, professional exposure, and progressive responsibility.
- Participation opportunities are unequal and influenced by gender, disability, ethnicity, geography, displacement, and socio-economic conditions.
- Young adults are not consistently visible in mine action data because national definitions of youth do not align with reporting categories that typically distinguish between children and adults.
- Broader commitments to youth participation are not yet systematically integrated into mine action policy, planning, coordination, or monitoring.

The central challenge is not simply to involve more young people, but to create safe, inclusive, and sustained opportunities for them to contribute, influence decisions, and progress into professional and leadership roles. This requires stronger partnerships, appropriate resources, better data, and closer links between mine action institutions and wider youth structures.

PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

This evidence brief examines how young people contribute to mine action and the conditions that support meaningful participation and leadership. It seeks to answer three questions:

- How are young people contributing to mine action?
- What enables or constrains meaningful participation, influence, and leadership?
- What lessons can inform future mine action policy and practice?

Young people contributed to the research by conducting and participating in multi-stakeholder workshop and semi-structured interviews examining their experiences of mine action, pathways into participation, and perceptions of leadership and influence. They supported the design of the in-country research process and interpreted and consolidated the findings.

Primary data was collected through a multi-stakeholder workshop convened by the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) and the Campaña Colombiana Contra Minas (CCCM) in Bogotá in November 2025, which brought together 16 young people aged 18–30 from youth organizations, mine action operators, and civil society actors including indigenous and Afro-Colombian young people and EO survivors. Participants represented a wide range of regions, including Bogotá, Samaniego, and Tumaco (Nariño); Cúcuta and Hocari (Norte de Santander); Inzá (Cauca); Puerto Asís and Puerto Caicedo (Putumayo); and Nariño (Antioquia). The workshop featured facilitated focus group discussions.

In addition, young researchers affiliated with the CCCM conducted 12 semi-structured interviews between May and June 2026 with participants aged 20–25 from Nariño and Huila. Participants were purposively identified through the CCCM's existing networks, focusing on young people with experience or involvement in mine action, particularly EORE activities. Participation was voluntary, and steps were taken to apply informed-consent, confidentiality, and safeguarding measures.

The evidence base differs across the three cases. The Colombia case draws on original qualitative research, whereas the Somalia and Ukraine cases rely more extensively on secondary sources and documented initiatives. The findings should therefore be understood as illustrative rather than representative of all young people, mine action programmes, or national contexts.

INTRODUCTION

What is the Youth, Peace, and Security Agenda?

The adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250 on youth, peace, and security (YPS) in 2015 marked an important shift in international policy. It recognized young people not only as people affected by conflict or associated with security risks, but also as partners in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and recovery.[3]

Subsequent resolutions, including UNSCR 2419 (2018) and UNSCR 2535 (2020), further strengthened commitments to meaningful youth participation in peace and security decision-making and emphasized support for youth-led initiatives and local leadership.[4]

The YPS Agenda is organized around five pillars: participation; protection; prevention; partnerships; and disengagement and reintegration. These pillars provide a framework for protecting young people from violence and enabling them to contribute to peace and security policies and processes.[5]

Age-related definitions

There is no universally agreed international definition of youth. The terms used to describe young people vary across international frameworks and national contexts. The definitions below explain how they are used in this brief.[6]

Term	Definition
Children	Persons under 18, consistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
Adolescents	Persons aged 10–19.
Youth	Persons falling within the age range established by the relevant national legislation or policy. Age ranges vary between countries.
Young people	An umbrella term covering adolescents and youth where both groups are relevant.

For the purposes of UNSCR 2250, youth is defined as persons aged 18–29,[7] while the United Nations (UN) uses the range 15–24 for statistical purposes.[8] These categories overlap and are not mutually exclusive. Some people classified as youth remain children under international law and are therefore subject to applicable safeguarding and protection requirements.[9]

How are young people affected by explosive ordnance?

The scale of youth exposure to fragility and conflict is significant: the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimates that more than 698 million people aged 15–35 live in fragile and conflict-affected settings globally.[10] Within these settings, young people may experience violence, displacement, unemployment, and restricted access to education, livelihoods, and public services. EO contamination can exacerbate these pressures by further restricting movement and access to land, infrastructure, and essential services.[11] Conflict and exposure to EO can affect young people's psychosocial well-being and social reintegration, with consequences that may persist over time.[12]

Available casualty data provides only a partial picture of young people's exposure. In 2024, at least 6,279 casualties from EO were recorded globally. Civilians accounted for 90 per cent of casualties where the civilian status was known, while children represented 46 per cent of civilian casualties for whom the age was recorded.[13] Global casualty data, however, generally distinguishes between children and adults rather than applying the youth age ranges defined by UNSCR 2250 or national legislation. Consequently, casualties among young people cannot be consistently identified, limiting understanding of their exposure and needs.

The consequences of an EO incident–beyond the immediate injury–may develop over time and vary by life stage. Injuries can disrupt education, psychosocial development, and social inclusion. For adolescents, these effects may impact the transition from education into vocational training and employment. However, evidence on the specific consequences for young adults–including how these differ from those experienced by older adults–remains limited.[14]

Why is it important to engage young people in mine action?

Youth engagement can improve mine action. Young people's knowledge of local risks, communication practices, and community networks can make interventions more relevant, accessible, and responsive.

Youth engagement can strengthen the sector's long-term sustainability. Structured pathways through education, volunteering, internships, training, and employment enable young people to develop skills, contribute professionally, and progress into leadership roles.

Youth engagement supports wider recovery and peacebuilding. Engaging young people in mine action helps to strengthen their skills and networks, recognize them as partners, and advance their meaningful participation under the YPS Agenda.

WHAT YOUTH ENGAGEMENT LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

Meaningful youth engagement is voluntary, safe, inclusive, and adequately supported. It provides young people with genuine opportunities to influence activities, priorities, and decisions, rather than limiting their participation to attendance, consultation, or the delivery of activities designed by others.[15]

The following case studies examine how young people engage with mine action in three different operational contexts.

COLOMBIA: PATHWAYS INTO MINE ACTION LEADERSHIP

Background

Colombian legislation defines youth as people aged 14–28.[16] In 2026, this age group represented an estimated 24.7 per cent–approximately 13.2 million–of the country's population.[17]

In Colombia, mine action is closely linked to broader recovery and peacebuilding efforts following decades of conflict. Continued violence and insecurity in some areas constrain access to affected communities, contribute to displacement, and undermine trust.[18] The remaining contamination is concentrated in areas affected by ongoing conflict, including rural, border, indigenous, and Afro-Colombian territories.[19]

In 2024, civilians accounted for 60 per cent of recorded casualties. The proportion of casualties involving children and adolescents increased from 12 to 23 per cent over the period reviewed.[20] Available reporting, however, does not consistently provide data corresponding to Colombia's nationally defined youth age range, limiting analysis of young people's specific exposure and needs.

Forms and levels of youth engagement

EORE has been delivered at considerable scale in Colombia. During 2023–2024, 25,082 activities reached 370,137 people, with women making up approximately half of the recorded beneficiaries. In addition, 140 people were certified through the national occupational competency standard for EORE in partnership with the National Learning Service (Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje, SENA).[21] Public reporting, however, does not separately identify EORE beneficiaries or certified practitioners aged 14–28.

Within this broader context, focus group discussions and interviews with young mine action practitioners and youth leaders identified several entry points for youth involvement in mine action, ranging from community-based participation to employment opportunities.



A participant during a session of the YPS and Mine Action Workshop in Colombia, November 2025 © CCCM

Community-based participation: Awá youth in Nariño

Awá youth participated in role-playing exercises, community mapping, dialogue sessions, and safe-route identification to identify risk behaviours and strengthen community reporting mechanisms. These activities combined risk education with opportunities for young people to contribute local knowledge and support community protection.

As members of affected communities, young people were known to residents and maintained relationships across different groups. These connections supported information sharing and communication between communities and mine action organizations, particularly where trust and acceptance affected access to information and the implementation of activities.

The case of Awá illustrates how young people can contribute at the community level through their contextual knowledge, relationships, and capacity to support communication. Young people's involvement was often motivated by direct experiences of conflict, contamination, or displacement, or by concerns for the safety of their communities.[22]

Beyond community-based participation, interviews identified different routes into employment in mine action. Katherine's and Rafael's experiences, highlighted below, show how initial opportunities can lead to longer-term career progression in the sector.



Katherine Otalora © CCCM

Katherine: From internship to global advocacy

Katherine entered the mine action sector at the age of 22 through a university internship with the CCCM. Coming from a conflict-affected community, she was drawn to the organization's humanitarian work with communities affected by EO.

The internship developed into a professional role supporting EORE through programme and project management. Katherine subsequently moved into advocacy and international engagement. Participation in the Mine Action Fellows Programme, coordinated by Mines Action Canada, gave her opportunities to strengthen her communication and public-speaking skills, improve her English, and interact with diplomats, donors, and practitioners from different countries. She also began mentoring other young people entering policy and advocacy spaces.[23]

Reflecting on the experience, Katherine explained: "Participating in the Mine Action Fellows helped me improve my confidence in public speaking, while also helping me understand how valuable it is to be supported by, and to support, other young people who are beginning to engage in the humanitarian mine action sector. Another important aspect was being able to see firsthand the meaningful efforts made to promote the participation of women in humanitarian disarmament."[24]

Katherine's progression illustrates the role that internships, skills development, peer support, and professional networks can play in creating pathways into leadership.



Raphael Cuellar © CCCM

Rafael: From deminer to technical leader

Rafael entered mine action in Algeciras, Huila, at the age of 21. As the son of farming parents, he had extensive knowledge of the local territory and was personally familiar with people affected by EO. Over the following decade, he progressed from deminer to team leader, supervisor, deputy manager, and ultimately technical clearance manager.[25]

A defining moment in Rafael's career came when he discovered the first explosive device reported by the CCCM during clearance operations. He described this not simply as a technical achievement, but as a personal experience because he understood that finding and removing the device could prevent injury or death: "Finding the first landmine in CCCM's history helped me understand this 'silent enemy' not as a source of fear, but as a reminder that our work can save lives."[26]

As Rafael progressed, he developed operational and managerial competencies. His understanding of leadership also expanded beyond operational supervision as he recognized the importance of empathy, listening, supporting colleagues, and creating opportunities for others to develop.



Raphael Cuellar © CCCM

These examples demonstrate that young people in Colombia are not simply recipients of assistance, but actively contribute as educators, advocates, community mobilizers, and practitioners. Survivors and young leaders have raised awareness of EO contamination, promoted the rights of affected populations, and advocated for greater attention to inclusion, accessibility, community priorities, and wider peacebuilding efforts.[27] The evidence illustrates progressively greater levels of participation–from contributing community knowledge and supporting implementation to assuming professional, technical, and leadership responsibilities.

Reflecting a broader aspiration for youth influence, Rocío, a youth leader from Tumaco, explained: "Young people are the future, and we must be the ones guiding the next generation and raising our voices."[28]

Barriers and enablers of youth engagement

Several factors affect whether young people can access, contribute to, and progress within mine action in Colombia. Conflict-related and geographical barriers are particularly significant. Continuing insecurity, armed group control, displacement, and confinement can restrict movement, disrupt employment, and prevent mine action organizations from reaching affected communities. Community members may also be reluctant to share information about contamination because of mistrust or fear of reprisals. These constraints are especially relevant in rural, border, and ethnic territories where EO-related needs are concentrated.[29]

Opportunities for youth engagement also differ considerably across territories and population groups. Workshop participants highlighted the distinct experiences of indigenous and Afro-Colombian youth, whose exposure to conflict, contamination, displacement, and exclusion may be greater than that of other populations.[30] Interviews also suggest that young people in rural and conflict-affected areas may possess highly relevant local knowledge and strong community ties, while facing greater barriers to accessing training, employment, internet connectivity, and opportunities to participate in the mine action sector.[31]

Taking part in mine action activities does not necessarily give young people greater influence over decisions or help them build a career. They may, for example, contribute to consultations, outreach, advocacy, and programme delivery while remaining excluded from strategic discussions and formal decision-making.[32] Internships, volunteering, temporary employment, and personal networks can offer pathways into the sector, but these opportunities are often informal and unequal.[33] Young people without access to universities, professional contacts, or paid work may be excluded.

Katherine's and Rafael's experiences show how internships, practical experience, mentoring, training, and progressive responsibility can support progression into professional and leadership roles. They also highlight the importance of language skills, mobility, and professional networks, which are not equally accessible to everyone. Their experiences illustrate what these pathways can achieve, but not how widely available they are across the sector.

Colombia's legal and institutional framework provides potential mechanisms for more systematic youth engagement. The Estatuto de Ciudadanía Juvenil (Youth Citizenship Statute), established by Law 1622 of 2013 and amended by Law 1885 of 2018, recognizes young people's right to participate in public decision-making and establishes the National Youth System–including youth councils and platforms at national and territorial levels.[34]

Community organizations, universities, civil society organizations, and youth networks, such as Fundación LATIR and the Colombian Coalition on YPS, provide further entry points for engagement. Building stronger links between these actors, formal youth participation mechanisms, and mine action institutions could expand young people's participation and influence. Paid opportunities, mentoring, training, and professional development could also create clearer and more accessible pathways into professional and leadership roles.

SOMALIA: YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN POST-CLEARANCE RECOVERY

Background

Somalia's National Youth Policy defines youth as people aged 15–35. An estimated 81.5 per cent of the country's population is under the age of 35, highlighting the demographic importance of children and young people.[35] This figure includes children under the age of 15, however, and should therefore not be interpreted as the proportion classified as youth.

Somalia's EO contamination stems from successive interstate and internal conflicts. Contamination threatens civilian safety, restricts access to land and infrastructure, and impedes livelihoods, humanitarian access, and wider recovery.[36] Conflict, displacement, limited education and employment opportunities, and exclusion from civic and political processes are among the challenges affecting young people in the country.[37]

Available casualty data indicates that children are disproportionately affected by EO in Somalia. In 2024, children accounted for 47 of the 53 recorded EO casualties–89 per cent of the total. Boys were particularly affected, comprising 39 of the 47 child casualties and 74 per cent of all recorded casualties.[38] There is, however, limited age-disaggregated data on young people's specific exposure to EO, related needs, or participation in mine action.

Forms and levels of youth engagement

EORE programmes in Somalia have reached substantial numbers of children. In 2025, Somalia reported reaching 24,835 people–including 7,037 girls and 6,984 boys–through face-to-face and school- or community-based activities; radio broadcasts; and risk-education messaging devices.[39] Public reporting, however, does not separately identify EORE beneficiaries within Somalia's nationally defined youth age range of 15–35.

Heral: Youth involvement in post-clearance activities

In Heral, Galmudug state, EO contamination posed significant risks to civilians and restricted access to public spaces and community infrastructure. Following a request from the Galmudug Mine Action Centre, the United Nations Mine Action Service conducted clearance operations between 2018 and 2019. Once the land was declared safe, the United Nations Mine Action Service and the Somali Explosive Management Authority (SEMA) organized activities as part of the global Safe Ground Campaign, linking land release with sport and community engagement.[40]

Young people from two neighbourhoods received EORE, helped prepare a football pitch on the released land, and played in a match attended by local authorities, elders, and other community members. Their participation not only helped demonstrate that the released land could be safely returned to community use, but also supported its transformation from a previously inaccessible area into a space for recreation and community interaction.[41] Combining EORE with football provided a locally relevant way to involve young people and demonstrate the benefits of clearance to the wider community.

While the Heral initiative combined youth-centred EORE with active participation in the recreational use of released land, the available evidence suggests that young people were only involved at the activity level; the documentation does not indicate that they influenced the activity's design, decisions concerning the future use of the land, or longer-term implementation.

Barriers and enablers of youth engagement

Several factors may affect whether this type of participation can be sustained and made available to young people from diverse backgrounds. Armed conflict and insecurity can restrict movement, access to affected areas, and the continuity of programming. Clan affiliation may also shape representation and access to opportunities and should therefore be considered when designing inclusive activities.[42] Respect for and the authority of elders are important features of Somali social and political life, with traditional and clan elders playing prominent roles in community and political decision-making. These generational hierarchies can make it more difficult for young people to influence decisions in both formal and informal settings.[43]

Institutional approaches can create further barriers to youth engagement. Somalia's National Youth Policy identifies

fragmented programming, limited coordination, and insufficient meaningful youth participation in initiatives aimed at supporting young people. It also notes that many programmes are designed through top-down processes without sufficient input from young people and communities, contributing to exclusion, mistrust, and tokenistic participation.[44]

Opportunities for youth engagement are also unevenly distributed. Somalia's National Youth Policy identifies limited inclusive grassroots participation mechanisms, with young women typically having more restricted access to services, facilities, information, and employment, as well as rural youth compared with than urban counterparts.[45] Gendered expectations around domestic and caregiving responsibilities, mobility, public visibility, and safety may impede some young women's participation in community activities and formal decision-making.[46] Such barriers may be particularly relevant to activities conducted in traditionally male-dominated spaces, such as football.

Young men may have greater access to some public spaces but face different pressures. Limited economic, social, and political opportunities can increase their vulnerability to recruitment by armed groups. They may also be treated primarily as potential security threats rather than recognized as community and peacebuilding actors.[47] Gendered expectations that men should provide for and protect their families can create additional pressures, particularly where livelihood opportunities are limited.[48]

Young people with disabilities may face further barriers. Inaccessible infrastructure and communications, inadequate mobility support, stigma, and discrimination can restrict their participation in community and public life.[49] The National Youth Policy calls for young people with disabilities and their representative organizations to participate fully in the design and implementation of programmes affecting their lives.

Somalia has institutional and community-based entry points that could support more sustained engagement, despite these barriers. The Somali National Youth Conference, the UN Youth Advisory Board, the Joint Galkayo Youth Committee, and the Somali Youth 4 Peace Pact have enabled young people from different backgrounds and regions to contribute to peacebuilding discussions and engage with national and international institutions.[50]

The government has also developed a National Action Plan on Youth, Peace, and Security, which recognizes the role of young people in peacebuilding and development. Youth-led and wider civil society organizations provide additional networks through which young people can articulate priorities, engage with public institutions, and contribute to community-level initiatives.[51]

Conflict and displacement have also altered some established gender and household roles. Women, including young women, have assumed greater responsibilities for income generation, household survival, community organization, and peacebuilding. These experiences and networks may lay the foundations for greater participation in mine action and post-clearance recovery; however, increased responsibility does not necessarily translate into greater formal influence and may be accompanied by additional economic and caregiving burdens.[52]

Existing institutional mechanisms and community networks could help extend youth participation beyond individual activities. Future initiatives could involve young people at different stages of mine action–including in programme design and decisions about the use of released land–while facilitating the participation of young people from diverse backgrounds.

UKRAINE: ADAPTING EXPLOSIVE ORDNANCE RISK EDUCATION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Background

Ukraine defines youth as people aged 14–35.[53] At the beginning of 2022, this age group comprised approximately 10 million people, representing 24.3 per cent of the country's population.[54] Subsequent displacement and migration mean that the current size and geographic distribution of the youth population are uncertain.

Since the full-scale invasion in 2022, EO contamination has restricted access to agricultural land, education, transport routes, workplaces, and public spaces.[55] These restrictions compound the wider effects of the conflict on young people, including displacement, interrupted education, family separation, bereavement, deteriorating mental health, reduced income and employment opportunities, and the impacts of military mobilization–particularly for men aged 25 and over.[56]

Data directly related to EO is concentrated on children and adolescents. Between February 2022 and March 2025, almost 80 per cent of the 110 children killed or injured by EO were boys, with adolescent boys aged 14–17 identified as particularly at risk.[57] While this provides important evidence of differentiated risk among children, much less is known about young adults' exposure, needs, and engagement.

Forms and levels of youth engagement

Documented engagement by young people in Ukraine ranges from receiving EORE to creating safety content and contributing professionally to its delivery. Although the national definition of youth extends to age 35, much of the available evidence concerns children and adolescents rather than the full youth age range.

The most extensive evidence of engagement by young people concerns youth-centred EORE. Since 2023, EORE has been incorporated into the mandatory school subject "health, safety, and well-being", providing children and adolescents with age-appropriate EORE.[58] Mobile Safety Classes have also been used to reach children in front-line and hard-to-reach communities, including where access to formal education has been disrupted.[59]

Digital campaigns, online games, mobile applications, comics, videos, and animated characters provide additional ways to communicate with younger audiences.[60] Virtual reality and educational games have also been used to simulate risk scenarios and reinforce safe behaviour.[61] Other initiatives have combined informal discussions with the use of public figures, including television presenters and comedians, to communicate with teenagers and young people in affected communities.[62] These approaches demonstrate how EORE can be adapted to younger people's learning environments and communication practices.

Some initiatives involve young people more actively. In April 2025, 30 young rescuer teams from 13 regions created and shared EORE content that received approximately 57,000 views on TikTok.[63] Developed as part of a wider campaign involving civil society partners and digital influencers, this serves as an example of young people contributing to public communication rather than solely receiving safety messages.

Other initiatives have sought to strengthen the capacity of professionals to engage young people more effectively. In 2025, Ukrainian Red Cross EORE specialists participated in training that enabled them to develop EORE projects for young people and to strengthen their communication skills.[64] While relevant to youth-responsive programming, however, this does not constitute evidence of young people's professional participation in mine action.

Overall, the evidence demonstrates increasingly active forms of engagement but provides limited evidence of sustained youth influence over programme design, monitoring, coordination, or strategic decision-making.

Barriers and enablers of youth engagement

Several factors affect whether young people can access, contribute to, and influence mine action in Ukraine. Conflict-related and geographical barriers are particularly significant. Insecurity and displacement can restrict movement, disrupt education and employment, and separate young people from community and professional networks. In rural and front-line areas, limited transport, unreliable electricity and internet connectivity, and inadequate information about available opportunities create additional barriers.[65]

These disruptions affect a substantial proportion of the youth population. Estimates suggest that, of Ukraine's pre-war population aged 15–35, 23 per cent are living abroad, 17 per cent are internally displaced, and 2 per cent are serving in the armed forces.[66] Displacement can weaken young people's access to education, employment, services, and established community and professional networks.

Social norms and patterns of exclusion affect both young people's exposure to EO and their opportunities to participate in mine action. The concentration of recorded child casualties among adolescent boys indicates the need to account for differentiated patterns of mobility, recreation, and risk-taking.[67] At the same time, it is reported that fear of mobilization may discourage some young men from attending public activities or participating openly in community mechanisms.[68]



Two participants in the land release training in Ukraine, 2026 © Alik Bobal

Higher levels of awareness do not necessarily translate into safer behaviour. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) found that, although most adolescents could identify EO risks and basic safety procedures, some continued to enter forests, abandoned buildings, and other potentially contaminated areas.[69] Risk-taking may reflect factors such as curiosity, peer dynamics, limited access to safe recreational spaces, and the normalization of danger. Effective EORE therefore requires an understanding of the factors influencing risk-taking among different groups, including mobility, recreation, peer dynamics, and access to safe alternatives.[70]

Multiple studies identify gender discrimination and cultural and familial expectations as barriers for young women seeking training and employment in technical fields.[71] Inaccessible transport and public spaces can restrict the participation of young people with disabilities, while Roma and other young people experiencing exclusion may face additional barriers affecting their access to community activities, education, and employment.[72]

Ukraine's legal and policy framework establishes commitments to youth participation. The Law on the Basic Principles of Youth Policy recognizes mechanisms that facilitate youth engagement, such as youth councils, youth centres, and youth organizations,[73] while the National Youth Strategy to 2030 commits the government to expanding young people's opportunities and participation in public life.[74] The National Mine Action Strategy for the period up to 2033 provides the overarching policy framework for the sector.[75] The sources reviewed, however, provide limited evidence that youth policy commitments have been systematically incorporated into mine action planning, coordination, or decision-making.

The breadth of Ukraine's youth definition also has practical implications for data collection. The category includes adolescents aged 14–17 as well as adults aged 18–35, whose risks, responsibilities, and opportunities may differ considerably. International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) 05.10 requires EORE beneficiary data to be disaggregated by sex and age, but the reporting categories defined in its minimum data requirements distinguish between children and adults rather than identifying young adults separately. Additional age bands would therefore be needed to determine which parts of Ukraine's youth population are participating in mine action and whether opportunities are equitably distributed.

Ukraine has institutional and community-based mechanisms that could support more sustained youth engagement. While schools provide an established channel for EORE, school-based delivery will not reach all young people, particularly where conflict, displacement, and school closures have disrupted attendance and access to in-person learning.[76] Mobile classes and community-based approaches are therefore important for reaching children outside conventional classrooms. Digital campaigns can further extend coverage but should complement in-person engagement where electricity, connectivity, or access to devices is limited.[77]

Youth councils, youth centres, civil society organizations, and volunteer networks provide additional entry points for involving youth in mine action. These mechanisms can support skills development, peer relationships, and civic participation, although their availability, resources, and institutional influence vary between regions.[78]

There is considerable interest among young Ukrainians in contributing to the country's recovery, but this does not always translate into participation. While many young people have shown a willingness to support recovery efforts in their communities, very few are reportedly doing so.[79] Connecting mine action with established youth councils, centres, and volunteering platforms could help convert this willingness into more sustained participation, while creating pathways for skills development and employment.

COMMON LESSONS FROM THE CASE STUDIES

The case studies are illustrative and draw on different types of evidence. Nevertheless, six common lessons emerge:

Young people make mine action more effective

Young people contribute as educators, communicators, community organizers, advocates, practitioners, and emerging leaders. Their knowledge of local risks, movement patterns, communication practices, and community networks can help mine action organizations understand priorities and reach different audiences. Their involvement can also support communication and trust, particularly where access to affected communities is difficult.[80]

Participation does not always bring influence

There is an important difference between designing programmes for young people and enabling them to shape their design, implementation, and governance. Young people consulted in Colombia described being invited to workshops, consultations, and awareness-raising activities without being given meaningful opportunities to influence priorities or decisions.[81] This reflects a wider challenge identified under the YPS Agenda: young people may be visible as beneficiaries, volunteers, or participants, yet remain under-represented in leadership and decision-making.[82]

Leadership develops through supported pathways

Evidence from Colombia demonstrates that leadership rarely develops through a single opportunity. Volunteering, internships, fellowships, and entry-level employment can provide initial routes into mine action, while practical experience, training, and progressive responsibility support progression into operational and leadership roles.[83] Mentoring is particularly important. Supportive colleagues, supervisors, and organizations can help young professionals build confidence, navigate institutions, and access wider networks. Leadership development therefore requires sustained pathways that connect initial participation with professional development, paid employment, and realistic opportunities for progression.

Participation opportunities are unequal

Evidence concerning young people's wider social and economic participation across the three countries indicates that gender, disability, ethnicity, geography, displacement, education, and socio-economic status shape who can participate and progress. Young people in rural or conflict-affected areas may have valuable local knowledge but less access to training, transport, internet connectivity, and professional networks. Where entry points depend on unpaid internships or volunteering, young people without the financial means to participate may face additional barriers. Mine action actors should therefore consider who is absent and why–supported by better age- and diversity-disaggregated data.

Young people are not consistently visible in mine action data

National definitions of youth vary, while mine action reporting generally distinguishes between children and adults. As a result, young adults are often not identified separately in data on casualties, EORE, employment, or participation. Better alignment and more detailed age-disaggregated data are needed to understand young people's exposure, needs, and contributions.

Broader youth commitments are not systematically connected to mine action

The countries examined have wider laws, policies, and institutions supporting youth participation, including commitments under the YPS Agenda. The sources reviewed, however, provide limited evidence that these commitments are reflected in mine action policy, planning, coordination, or monitoring. Stronger links with youth authorities, councils, and organizations could help embed youth engagement in mine action and move it beyond individual projects.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MINE ACTION ACTORS

The evidence from Colombia, Somalia, and Ukraine suggests that strengthening youth engagement requires action at different levels. While responsibilities differ between actors, all have a role to play in recognizing, supporting, and sustaining youth contributions.

National mine action authorities and centres

National mine action authorities and centres can embed youth engagement within national mine action strategies, standards, information management systems, coordination mechanisms, and monitoring frameworks. They can also collect age-disaggregated data to better understand young people's exposure to EO, access to mine action services, participation, and representation in the workforce, and use this evidence to inform planning and programming. They can also connect mine action policy and programming with broader national commitments and legislation concerning youth, as well as relevant government ministries and youth participation mechanisms.

Mine action operators

Mine action operators can involve young people in programme design, implementation, and monitoring, rather than solely as beneficiaries or activity participants. They can also create more equitable pathways into the sector through paid and internship opportunities, mentoring, training, and progressive responsibility.

Donors

Donors can support sustained youth engagement through longer-term funding for partnerships, paid opportunities, mentoring, and professional development. They can also coordinate their commitments and investments in mine action and YPS, helping to ensure that YPS priorities are reflected in mine action funding and programming. Donors can better support accessibility and safeguarding measures and encourage more systematic age-disaggregated monitoring of youth participation and workforce composition.

United Nations agencies and international organizations

UN agencies and international organizations can strengthen links between mine action and wider policy agendas, including YPS; women, peace, and security; disability inclusion; and localization. They can also support coordination, learning, and evidence-building across different contexts.

Youth organizations and civil society

Youth organizations, survivor networks, schools, universities, and community organizations can contribute knowledge, networks, and established participation mechanisms. Mine action institutions should engage them as partners and provide appropriate recognition and resources for their contributions.

CONCLUSION

This evidence brief reveals that young people are already contributing to mine action in diverse and important ways. Across Colombia, Somalia, and Ukraine, young people are acting as educators, communicators, community mobilizers, advocates, practitioners, and emerging leaders. These contributions often occur outside formal coordination structures, however, and remain fragmented, informal, and weakly institutionalized within mine action systems.

The evidence suggests that youth engagement can contribute to stronger communication with affected communities, more accessible and relevant risk education, greater community ownership, and wider recovery and peacebuilding outcomes. At the same time, the findings demonstrate that participation does not automatically translate into influence, leadership, or decision-making authority.

Across all three cases, meaningful participation depended upon enabling environments that included institutional support, partnerships, mentoring relationships, investment in capacity development, and safe and inclusive spaces for engagement. Leadership rarely emerged through a single intervention or opportunity; rather, it developed gradually through pathways involving volunteering, community engagement, internships, training, and progressive levels of responsibility.

The evidence also highlights the importance of recognizing that young people are not a homogeneous group. Opportunities for participation and leadership are shaped by gender, disability, ethnicity, geography, displacement status, and socio-economic conditions. Inclusive approaches must therefore consider the different barriers, risks, and experiences faced by different groups of young people.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that the question for mine action institutions is not whether young people have a role to play, but whether existing systems are prepared to recognize, support, and sustain that contribution over time. Strengthening youth engagement is not solely a matter of representation or inclusion. It is also an investment in more effective mine action programmes, stronger community relationships, and the future leadership and sustainability of the sector itself.

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Through its work, the GICHD strives for the fulfilment of international obligations, for national targets to be reached, and communities' protection from and resilience to explosive harm to be enhanced. These efforts support sustainable livelihoods, gender equality and inclusion. They save lives, facilitate the safe return of displaced populations, and promote peace and sustainable development.

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