

YOUTH TALK: SUCCESS STORY



Hussein - Becoming a Peace Ambassador

For Hussein Mohammed, a 16-year-old living in the slums of Tudor Moroto, Mombasa, where large families squeeze into a 36 square foot space and the river rising equates to a flooded home, life has always been a blend of challenges and resilience. Growing up in a polygamous family with 13 siblings, his childhood was marked by struggles. His mother raised him and his two younger siblings almost single-handedly as his father worked irregularly as a mason. His income was never enough to meet their needs, and at one point, Hussein had to drop out of school for an entire year due to a lack of fees. This experience ignited a fire within him to persevere and work harder in school to make up for lost time.

“When I was introduced to the Youth Journalist project, I saw it as a chance to transform my life. On my first day, despite my innate confidence, I felt shy when I was asked to introduce myself to the other participants. However, as the training sessions progressed, I began to grow in ways I never imagined. The lessons on conflict transformation were particularly impactful. They taught me not only how to handle disputes but also how to address deep-rooted issues within my community.”



As part of the Youth Talk project, Hussein attended Conflict Transformation workshops and participated in guided dialogues with other youth and across older generations. These activities are crucial because they address the root causes of conflict and promote sustainable relationships between conflicting parties.

“One memorable incident at school tested my newfound skills. Two of my classmates were fighting over something as trivial as a pen. Their argument escalated from verbal insults to physical confrontation. Drawing on what I had learned, I approached them and used religion as a unifying factor. Since both of them were Muslim, I reminded them that Islam promotes peace and understanding. Using the conflict tree method, I identified the root cause of their anger and guided them toward reconciliation. That moment showed me the power of dialogue and understanding in resolving conflicts.”

One of the most pervasive issues for life in the slums is gender-based violence (GBV), which leaves women vulnerable and perpetuates harmful societal norms. Many girls in Hussein’s community are denied education, while men are pressured into playing “manly” roles that often lead to emotional suppression and depression. His father experienced this firsthand. To support the family, his father started a small eatery. However, the community mocked him for taking on a job they considered unsuitable for a man. The derogatory comments and isolation forced him to shut down the business, leaving the family in financial turmoil.

“These experiences fueled my passion for change. Through the Youth Talk project, I collaborated with other youth journalists to address gender-based violence and stereotypes in our community. We organized a youth-led initiative that brought together guardians, local leaders, security personnel, religious figures, and other stakeholders. Using theater and poetry, we sparked conversations about the harmful effects of GBV and the importance of breaking down gender stereotypes. Leading these discussions was one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life.”

Hussein’s involvement in radio programs further amplified his voice. Hosting engaging discussions on important topics earned him recognition in both his school and community. *“It was heartwarming to have people approach me, saying they had heard me on the radio and appreciated my efforts.”* These programs, along with other initiatives, made a tangible impact. Young girls in the community became more aware of their rights, and the stigma around men working in roles like running eateries began to fade. *“Although my father hasn’t reopened his business, other young men now freely operate eateries without fear of discrimination.”*

“Today, I stand proud of what I have achieved despite the challenges. Growing up in the slums, surrounded by poverty and societal expectations, was not easy.”

Through his journey as a youth journalist, he discovered the power of using his voice to spark change. He aspires to continue being a peace ambassador in his community, encouraging others to rise above their hardships.

YOUTH TALK: SUCCESS STORY



From Challenges to Change: **Fatoumata's Vision for Inclusion and Peace in Mali**

“Taking part in this project gave me immense satisfaction in learning how to analyze conflict, communicate my ideas, and develop projects,”

Fatoumata Cissé, a visually impaired young woman from Mopti, Mali, grew up in a community where young women are often discouraged from participating in associative or NGO activities and are encouraged instead to focus on housework. Fatoumata, however, has dreams and passions, and there was a time when she felt caught between her personal aspirations and her family's expectations.

Being visually impaired brought some personal challenges in her day-to-day life in school. She first thought everyone saw the world as she did, and it was a struggle coming to terms with the reality: the feelings of isolation weighed heavily on her.

The conflict in her home region of Mopti also cast a shadow over her life. Historical tensions over land and grazing rights between ethnic groups, exacerbated by competition for resources and the presence of extremist groups, have escalated into ongoing violence and displacement since 2012. Fatoumata's family, affected by this conflict, eventually sought refuge in Bamako as internally displaced people.

Amidst all these challenges, a turning point came in her life when she got connected to Search's Youth Talk II project. This project empowers young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, including children with disabilities, to voice their views on national issues and take action in their communities. Fatoumata received training in conflict transformation, learning skills to manage conflicts and foster peace in her community. She and her peers applied these skills through the *Parlons Jeunesse* (Youth Talk) program, which combines radio shows on youth topics, intergenerational dialogues, and community activities such as clean-up initiatives and donations.

Inspired by her experience in the project, she applied for funding from the French embassy for a *cecifoot* project aimed at integrating visually impaired youth through soccer, slam, and educational awareness. Her project was awarded funding of 1.3 million CFA francs, a testament to her commitment to social inclusion.

Using her newly acquired skills, Fatoumata and her team also participated in *L'instant Thé*, a Malian reality show that aims to train citizens and motivate them to engage in participatory development projects. They earned second place in the show and received four million CFA francs.

Today, Fatoumata's confidence shines. She actively participates in the project's activities, has moderated panels in intergenerational dialogues, and was appointed conflict management manager at her school, a role that her school principal notes has brought newfound composure to her character.

Since her involvement in the *Parlons Jeunesse* project, Fatoumata has become a steadfast advocate for the rights of children, particularly those with visual impairments like herself.

“My most fervent wish is for peace to return to my country so different communities can live together in harmony. After my involvement in Parlons Jeunesse, I want to help my loved ones and my community understand the importance of unity, despite our differences in perception and perspective.”

YOUTH TALK: SUCCESS STORY



Mamadou's Journey **From Struggle to Strength**

“The trainings helped me to reflect on my role as a facilitator and the unconscious biases I brought to previous meetings.”

- Mamadou

Mamadou was born into descent-based slavery within a Soninké family in the Kayes region of Mali.

Descent-based slavery has long been a persistent issue in the Kayes region, dividing the population into two main social classes: the noble class and the so-called slave class. Tensions between these groups frequently esca-

late into violent clashes, often resulting in injury and even loss of life. Families from the “slave” class are often ordered to leave their villages, with more than a hundred families—including children—fleeing to Bamako, the capital, in search of safety. Mamadou's family was among those violently forced to abandon their village, leaving behind their land, possessions, and livelihood. This happened because Mamadou's parents joined an association to fight against descent-based slavery and promote equality and justice.

Mamadou was fortunate enough to be able to attend school in Bamako, but the trauma remained. Even after he joined the Youth Talk II project as one of the youngest beneficiaries, it wasn't an easy transition for him at the beginning. He was suspicious of other young participants, found it difficult to participate in the activities, and preferred being by himself. He was scared whenever he heard loud motorcycle noises, as they reminded him of the horrifying events in his village.

However, through Search's collaborative and experiential learning approach to training and other project activities, Mamadou did manage to overcome his fears and push himself to participate. He ended up taking the Common Ground Approach training, sessions of conflict-sensitive journalism, non-adversarial advocacy, and Youth 360 training, culminating in design workshops for youth-led initiatives. In the design workshops, Mamadou and his peers developed social cohesion initiatives tailored to their specific contexts, applying their training to create impactful, community-centered projects.

“The trainings helped me to reflect on my role as a

facilitator and the unconscious biases I brought to previous meetings.” - Mamadou

Since participating in the project activities, Mamadou is not as lonely as he used to feel among his community. He is active in his community, committed to raising awareness about the importance of unity and coexistence, even amidst the differing opinions. He also plans to establish an association focused on promoting peace and social cohesion, aiming to foster a stronger, more inclusive society.

Mamadou has become a role model for other young people in his community.

“My sincere hope is to return home to Bakamabougou and for my family and me to be accepted as we are. I hope that communities can live together in peace and tolerance. I just want people to understand that nothing conquers peace and freedom. You have to be affected by conflict to know the importance of peace and live under domination to know the importance of freedom. Each and every one of us must prioritize collective interest over self-interest.”

- Mamadou

YOUTH TALK: SUCCESS STORY



Lomong's Journey of **Transformation and Hope**

“...Despite my initial nervousness due to past experiences, my involvement in the Youth Talk project and Lugara Shabab program has transformed me into a confident leader who can now train other young people.”

Lomong lost both parents at the age of four, leaving him vulnerable and alone. To escape mistreatment from relatives who exploited him for food, Lomong left for Kapoeta Town at the age of 10, where he lived on the streets, exposed to smoking, drinking, and substance abuse. However, a new path emerged when he enrolled at Hope for South Sudan Primary School, which provided him education, stability, and hope. After completing his

primary education there, Lomong moved to Juba, where he attended Orphanage Straight Link Secondary School.

This is where his life took a transformative turn when he got the opportunity to be involved in Search's Youth Talk project as a member of the 2021 cohort of young adolescents. With Search, he received training in conflict transformation, basic journalism, and trauma healing, gaining the skills to lead intergenerational dialogue forums and mentor peers on critical social issues like drug abuse and school dropouts. His hard work also earned him a volunteer position at Search, where he collected stories for the Lugara Shabab radio program and moderated live discussions, showcasing his talents in English and Juba Arabic. The program was aired through Eye Radio across South Sudan.

Reflecting on his rough journey, Lomong shares, "Being a part of Search for Common Ground has taught me that every environment offers an opportunity to learn. I never imagined that I would be producing radio programs, editing audio, and presenting live talk shows. Despite my initial nervousness due to past experiences, my involvement in the Youth Talk project and Lugara Shabab program has transformed me into a confident leader who can now train other young people."

In March 2024, Lomong founded the "I CAN Group," a youth-led initiative aimed at supporting orphans and street children in Juba. With firsthand experience of street life, Lomong understood the challenges these children faced. His group offers mental health support, educational opportunities, and a safe space for vulnerable youth to rebuild their lives. The "I CAN Group," composed of 35 young peace champions, is making a positive impact, with female members from the local school joining to contribute to the cause.

Lomong's journey from a street child to a community leader demonstrates the transformative power of

opportunity, education, and mentorship. Now a first-year medical student at the University of Juba, he continues to serve his community through his work with the radio program and by empowering others. Lomong's story is a powerful example of how, with the right support, young people can rise above their circumstances and make lasting contributions to society.

"My journey with Search for Common Ground has empowered me to rise above my fears and embrace leadership," Lomong shares, "I now see myself not just as a learner but as a mentor who

is committed to passing on the skills and confidence I've gained to others, especially the youth in my community."

YOUTH TALK: SUCCESS STORY



Rising Above: Nyakang's Courageous Path to Inspire Change

“But within my heart, a flame of defiance burned brightly. I knew I was meant for more, and that education was my key to freedom. At age of 15, I knew I was meant for more than just marriage. I wanted to learn, to explore, and to build a future for myself.”

Nyakang Madlier's story is one of remarkable courage and resilience. Born into the Nuer community in South Sudan, where traditions often dictate a girl's future, her life was shaped by adversity from an early age. Growing up in an internally displaced persons' camp in Mangateen, she faced not only the trauma of civil unrest but also the suffocating pressure of an arranged marriage that her family had planned for her.



But Nyakang wasn't like most girls. Despite the many hardships—including violence, poverty, and a community that viewed girls as less valuable than boys—she dreamed of something more. With the unwavering support of her mother, Nyakang refused to follow the path her family had set for her. “I felt like abandoning my education, my only hope for a different life,” she recalls. “But within my heart, a flame of defiance burned brightly. I knew I was meant for more, and that education was my key to freedom. At age of 15, I knew I was meant for more than just marriage. I wanted to learn, to explore, and to build a future for myself.”

At just 15, Nyakang made the difficult decision to leave her father's house and flee to Juba to live with a relative and continue her education. This choice came with its own set of challenges—she often went without food and had to sell groundnuts to make ends meet—but she never regretted it. “It was the hardest decision of my life, but I knew that education was my only way to freedom and a better future.” Her mother, who understood the power of education, stood by her side, offering not just emotional support but the courage to defy societal norms. “I wanted Nyakang to have the opportunities I never had,” Nyakang's mother explains. “Education was her chance to change her life.”

Her journey took a new direction when she joined Venus High School in Juba. Here, she connected with Search for Common Ground's “Youth Talk” project, a program designed to give young people a voice. For Nyakang, it was more than just a platform—it was an opportunity to advocate for the rights of girls, particularly their right to education, something she had fought so hard for in her own life.

Through the project's radio program *Lugara Shabab*, Nyakang shared her story with others, becoming a role model for countless young girls facing similar challenges. “The Youth Talk project gave me the confidence to speak out,”

she says. “It made me realize that my story could help other girls like me.”

Nyakang's leadership soon made her a focal point for the intergenerational dialogue forums and youth-led initiatives focused on raising awareness about early marriage, especially among adolescent girls. She played an active role during the design and implementation of the locally-led initiatives that mainly targeted young people in the various project locations of Juba. Drawing on her own experience resisting forced marriage, she became a powerful advocate for change, using her voice to inspire and educate others through the platform provided by Search.

“I never thought my story could help others, but now I see that it can,” Nyakang says proudly. “After talking to a girl facing forced marriage, she found the confidence to resist her family's plans. I want every girl to know they can change their future, just like I did.”

Her community now looks to her as a role model on issues of girls' education, a recognition that fills her with pride. Today, Nyakang is a leader in her community, mentoring young people and advocating for policies that protect girls from forced marriage and ensure their right to education. Her message is clear: every girl deserves the chance to choose her own path. With dreams of becoming a journalist, Nyakang wants to continue shining a light on the struggles girls face and use her platform to bring about change.

“I never imagined my story could help others, but now I see that it can,” she reflects. “I want every girl to know that they have the power to shape their own future, just like I did.”