

Interfaith Dialogue on Violent Extremism

# Young People Building Peace

Seven young activists explain the steps they are taking to strengthen social cohesion and prevent violent extremism all over the world.

# INTRODUCTION

# Young People Building Peace

Violent extremism, whether motivated by politics, religion or ideology, is a global problem. Prevention is most successful if it tackles the causes and strengthens social cohesion. The experiences of young people from different cultural and religious backgrounds show how extremism can destroy families and decimate friendships. iDove is a unique flagship project that provides young people from Africa, Asia and Europe with a safe space for dialogue in which religiously motivated actors can exchange ideas and network.

Interfaith Dialogue on Violent Extremism (iDove) was launched in 2017 by the African Union's Citizens and Diaspora Directorate and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). It has resulted in a network of young practitioners, decision-makers, researchers, academics and media specialists from different continents who jointly conceive new ideas and innovative approaches to preventing extremism and take action to strengthen social cohesion.

The young people not only network in iDove, but also develop projects independently and implement them together. The network has reached almost 14,000 people with its activities to date. iDove is growing steadily and also expanding its involvement in Asia.



The Intercontinental Youth Forum in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, heralded iDove's first project phase in February 2017. Four thousand young people from 24 African and eight European countries applied to take part in the forum. Forty young experts were chosen, including a number of the protagonists profiled in this brochure, such as Ali Mahmoud from Lebanon, Anna Chundung Sheku from Nigeria, Mary Mwachiti from Kenya and Passy Mubalama from the Democratic Republic of Congo. They are already taking action in their home countries, albeit in very different ways. What they appreciate most about iDove is that they can network and exchange ideas with other young people engaged in politics, civil society, the arts, culture and education. They are coming up with new ideas and creating a counter-movement to violent extremism through the work in their countries.

One way in which young iDove activists are achieving this is by holding workshops in their communities in Africa, Asia and Europe. They are encouraging young adults to play an active role in preventing violent extremism and strengthening cohesion in their communities. Projects have been implemented in more than 20 countries to date, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Indonesia and Mali.

In this brochure, seven iDovers tell their personal stories and explain how they are contributing to understanding and cohesion through their religiously motivated engagement.

# ‘They were ordinary people like us.’

## Lejla Hasandedić-Đapo

Stari Most (‘Old Bridge’ in English) in Mostar, southern Bosnia, connects the Bosnian Muslim side of the city with the Croatian Catholic part. The bridge, a UN World Heritage Site, was destroyed in 1993 by Croatian troops during the Bosnian War. It was rebuilt in 2004 – partly as an attempt to heal the wound that had been inflicted by the war and bring the two parts of the city together again.



Source: Private

Lejla Hasandedić-Đapo was only four years old at the time and cannot remember the old bridge. But she can still recall her fear of the war. She grew up seeing dead bodies – her grandmother did not survive the war and a number of her friends were killed before her very eyes. She and her family remained in the Bosnian Muslim part of Mostar, while hundreds of thousands of her compatriots fled abroad. Prejudices against the Croats in the west of the city were deeply entrenched. ‘Even after the war, our parents drummed into us that the people in the other part of the city were our enemies and that we were not allowed to mix with them,’ says Lejla. ‘But I always wondered who they were and what they looked like – I had this fixed idea in my head of wanting to finally meet them.’

Many years after the war, an attempt was made to bridge the divide between the people by having children from the two parts of the city attend the same school. ‘The idea was brilliant,’ says Lejla, ‘but the way it was put into practice was terrible.’ The Bosnian children were taught on one floor, Croatian children on the other – at different times and with different break periods, closely guarded by security staff and the police. She and her classmates sought ways to disrupt this artificial separation. They formed a student council with the aim of meeting and getting to know pupils from what had been the opposing side of the city outside of school – without any guards around. They sat down at a table and simply had a good time together. ‘We



discovered that they were also into the Backstreet Boys, had a crush on the same stars and found maths difficult,' remembers Lejla. 'They were ordinary people like us.'

The wartime experiences have motivated Lejla to get involved in numerous peace projects and work to prevent violent extremism. Within the international iDove network, she launched a project focused on the mental health of victims and perpetrators. 'With extremism, we always look first at the victims, but as I've seen in my own city, the perpetrators also have their problems – where does the violence stem from? What causes it? I think it's important when seeking to prevent violence that we also consider the psychological aspects so that we can stop people from doing bad things,' says Lejla. Within iDove, she is implementing this idea with peace activists from all over the world.

Lejla is also encouraging reconciliation in Mostar itself – and the new Old Bridge is again playing a role in this. Most of her classmates only knew the bridge from the television. Lejla was able to convince them to visit it, which meant much more than simply taking a walk to the other side. The group also associated it with a sense of overcoming all of the tragedies, stereotypes and prejudices they had been taught by the war and their parents. 'It was a really emotional moment,' says Lejla. 'When we talk today in peace work about building bridges, I can say that I've truly experienced what that means at first hand.'



Source: Jocelyn Erskine-Kellie / [pexels.com](https://www.pexels.com)



## AFGHANISTAN

**‘We’re still spreading  
our messages;  
we’re not staying  
quiet.’**

### Mohammad Afzal Zarghoni



Source: Mohammad Afzal Zarghoni

A great deal has changed for Mohammad Afzal Zarghoni since the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in the summer of 2021 – 20 years after being toppled. Mohammad is a researcher and peace activist and spends most of his time at home in his native Kabul. ‘We Afghans who worked extensively with Europe and the US are fearful and prefer to stay out of sight,’ he says in hushed tones. ‘It’s like being in a prison. We grew up in a democracy for 20 years – now the old government has collapsed and extremists are in power.’

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Afghanistan was supposed to become a democratic republic. Mohammad wanted to play his part in this. He travelled to almost every corner of the land to hold workshops and give presentations on peacebuilding and preventing violent extremism. He also got involved in national and international non-governmental and educational organisations, such as the American University of Afghanistan, the High Peace Council and the Afghan High Council for National Reconciliation. Mohammad received a letter of appreciation for his contribution from Ashraf Ghani, the former President of Afghanistan. He also worked on the De-radicalisation of Afghan Youth (DAY) initiative as a project manager for 200 young people who had failed in attempted suicide attacks in the country. ‘Afghanistan has been suffering the effects of war for more than 40 years and is trying to combat extremism,’ he says. ‘There is still a great deal of preventive work to be done, especially with the young generation, which makes up more than half of the population. Young people are easily influenced and are being drawn into the fold of extremist groups.’

Mohammad joined iDove in November 2020, motivated by a wish to counteract the radicalisation of Afghan youth even more resolutely. ‘I benefit all the time from the training and exchanges at iDove,’ says Mohammad. iDove discussions gave



Source: Afghan Youth Voices Festival / [flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/afghan-youth-voices-festival/)

him the idea for an academic paper that he wrote while studying at the KAICIID Dialogue Centre, for example. The paper examines the role of religious actors in dialogue for peace work and conflict prevention in Afghanistan. 'iDove offers excellent courses and helpful information,' says the young researcher in praise of the project. 'I've also got to know some wonderful people there.'

As it has only been possible for him to participate in the events online on account of the coronavirus pandemic, he has also needed technical support on several occasions: 'The organisers have been so patient with me and have always helped when I've had issues with my internet connection.'

The internet has become essential to him and other young activists in Afghanistan involved in international peace work since the Taliban seized power, allowing them to network in online seminars and on social media while continuing their work. 'I'm here at home right now,' he says. 'But if they look at my Twitter feed, they can see that we're still spreading our messages; we're not staying quiet.'

If the situation improves again, he hopes to use the international iDove network to offer programmes countering violent extremism, especially at the universities in the country, in which Afghan youth will be able to share ideas with young people from all over the world and tell their stories. 'It's one thing to hear something about the situation in other countries in the media, but a large network like iDove also gives young people an opportunity to understand each other even better and to build bridges.'



# ‘I want to finally live my life without fear.’

## Passy Mubalama



Source: Private / Aidprofen

Passy Mubalama has not yet known much peace or stability in her lifetime. This is partly due to the region where the 38-year-old comes from. Passy is a Congolese woman from the east of this enormous country and experienced the effects of the Rwandan genocide in 1994 as a child, when some 800,000 Tutsis and opposition Hutus were murdered in Rwanda within just a few weeks. Those who could fled over the border into eastern Congo for safety – followed by many Hutus fleeing reprisal attacks by the survivors and liberators after Rwanda’s liberation and the end of the genocide.

In 1996, the growing tension culminated in a civil war in eastern Congo, which ended in 1997 when the dictator Mobutu Sese Seko was overthrown by rebel leader Laurent-Désiré Kabila. But there was to be no peace – eastern Congo is rich in natural resources and everyone wanted their share of the spoils. Skirmishes and armed conflict resulted in the next war just one year later. Even today, peace has still not been restored to the region.

Fear is therefore ever-present for Passy in her daily life. And although the situation has now improved to some extent, there is no peace to speak of. Passy says that kidnappings and murders are still commonplace. Nobody dares to venture outside once it gets dark unless they really have to – the streets are much too dangerous. As is so frequently the case, the worst affected are women and girls from the camps for internally displaced persons around Passy’s home city of Goma. Passy set her heart on becoming a journalist so that she could make their voices heard and tell their stories. Her goal of promoting the rights of women and girls also inspired Passy to found her own organisation in 2011.

The non-governmental organisation (NGO) is called Aidprofen and initiates programmes aimed at promoting human rights,





combating sexualised and gender-based violence and encouraging women and girls in the Democratic Republic of Congo to participate in the political process.

Passy takes inspiration for her work from iDove and the exchanges with other activists. This led to the creation of the Youth Brigade project, an art competition designed to help defuse ongoing conflict and discrimination between different ethnic groups in Goma. The aim was to build bridges between members of the Kimu, Hutu and Tutsi communities and create a culture of mutual respect. 'We bring together various artists who exhibit their works, including drawings, sculptures, theatrical works and much more,' explains Passy. The artists taking part belong to different communities and have contributed to post-conflict peacebuilding by participating in a joint exhibition. Following the art competition, a discussion forum was held with more than 200 community members, including several religious leaders of different faiths.

Passy was awarded a Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellowship in 2018 for her remarkable work on advancing the interests of women and girls and was also chosen as one of five changemakers by 11.11.11, a coalition of various NGOs. 'Women need to play a greater role in society in future,' Passy explains. She aims to continue working towards this goal.

Having taken part in the iDove conferences in Addis Ababa and Dakar before the COVID-19 pandemic, she is now offering training to peace ambassadors for eastern Congo through Aidprofen. She is firmly convinced that dialogue with others is key to overcoming violence and extremism.



This feature is based on an article by Katrin Gänslar for Akzente 09/2021.

Source: Aidprofen /  
iDove Art competition

# ‘There’s no point in revenge if we want to live in peace.’

## Anna Chundung Sheku



Source: Private

A Christian woman made her way through a group of Muslims observing Friday prayers, although the street was closed for the faithful. This seemingly harmless scene in Lagos, Nigeria’s largest city, set off a wave of violence in the West African country during which followers of both religions set fire to churches and mosques and several hundred people lost their lives.

Anna Chundung Sheku’s brother was among these victims. ‘We were having dinner at home in the evening when we heard noises outside,’ she recalls. ‘My brother went out into the street to see what was happening. There he was swept into a fight between herders and farmers and was killed.’ The conflict between Muslim herders and Christian farmers has already been smouldering for two decades and the reasons for it are complex. One aspect is that fertile land is becoming increasingly scarce and is therefore a bone of contention between herders and farmers. Another is that extremist groups such as the radical Islamist Boko Haram are exploiting the tension that is already present to foment even more hatred.

This conflict cost her brother his life. Instead of succumbing to her anger and grief, however, Anna joined a youth initiative that works to counter violence and promote reconciliation between Christians and Muslims. ‘It was obvious to me that there’s no point in revenge if we want to live in peace,’ she says. Anna, a media science graduate, now brings together young and old as part of an intergenerational storytelling project. ‘We



Source: Tope A. Asokere / [pexels.com](https://pexels.com)

rely here on the wisdom and experience of elders and also religious leaders. They remember a different time and know how conflicts used to be resolved. And the young people respect them.'

Getting the project up and running has not been entirely without danger. Anna and her friends initially went into the communities and tried to encourage people to take part. 'One time, a row broke out during an introductory meeting,' she mentions, 'and we had to run for our lives.' In most cases, however, they have succeeded in breaking the ice and convincing the communities to come together to talk. The initiative has also received psychosocial support from psychologists and social workers, as deep-seated trauma cannot be overcome simply through discussion.

Anna heard about the iDove network through Twitter. 'In a training course on preventing violent extremism, I learned that prevention begins within the family. I recognised that my family tree is broken and that I would have to start there.' She has also learned through iDove how to integrate social media into her work and establish a network, which she says is important for reaching people in other parts of the country as well.

'My religion has helped me to understand that peace is of vital importance,' she says. 'If I can help to create a better future for young people, then my brother's death will not have been in vain.'





**‘You need a great deal of patience and energy if you want to promote dialogue and understanding.’**

## Agatha Lydia Natania



Source: Private

Agatha Lydia Natania has been an active member of the Catholic church in her home city of Bogor, around 90 minutes by car south of the Indonesian capital of Jakarta, since her childhood. She was recently chosen to be one of the 20 teenagers and young adults who make up the Vatican's International Youth Advisory Body and will be engaging in regular exchanges with Rome for the next three years. The voice of young people is more important than ever for the Catholic Church, which has been shaken by abuse scandals and a decline in numbers. 'The fact that the Catholic Church is prepared to speak with us about sensitive topics as well, to listen to us and also to take our advice on board is a sign of great progress,' says Agatha.

In her home city, Agatha leads youth groups and supports the Catholic Bishops' Conference with youth projects and social media. In school and among people her own age, however, she has also experienced exclusion due to her religion. Indonesia has the largest Muslim population of any country in the world. There are 230 million Muslims compared to 8.3 million Catholics – and Agatha is a member of this minority. Her classmates were worried 'that I would try to convert them or wanted to convince them of Catholic beliefs – which wasn't the case.' Her Catholic friends had similar experiences. This has inspired Agatha to act against religious intolerance because, as she says, religious diversity is a strength.

Ever since then, Agatha has been advocating religious tolerance and has been going into schools to convince children and young people of the benefits of diversity. She joined ASEAN Youth, the youth organisation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), to work for dialogue and understanding at national level. 'There have been ups and



Source: GIZ

downs along the way – you need a great deal of patience and energy if you want to promote dialogue and understanding,’ says Agatha. She is currently working at the Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (ASEAN-IPR) Indonesia, which is attached to Indonesia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where she is continuing her commitment to peace and reconciliation.

In Indonesia, too, violent extremism is on the rise, especially among young people. ‘Instead of critically examining things, they allow themselves to be influenced by religious leaders who simply use and radicalise them,’ says Agatha to describe the situation. While many young people in Indonesia are opposed to extremist violence, the government does not listen to them. ‘It’s very difficult for us young people to have a say in political decision-making processes,’ complains the activist. ‘That is why I want to work for greater youth participation in the battle against violent extremism.’

Agatha took part in her first iDove meeting when one was hosted in Jakarta in December 2019. A participant from another region of Indonesia spoke to her there about his experiences with violent extremism. ‘I would never have found out about it like that through the media,’ she says. ‘Even though I was not directly affected, it spurred me on to stop the violence in my country.’ For Agatha, this means preventing hatred and violence and promoting tolerance and a culture of peace and solidarity. It also involves making young people’s voices heard.

‘iDove has given me the courage to continue my work,’ says Agatha. ‘No matter how hard it may be at times, through iDove I know that there are lots of young people on all continents working just as hard for peace and dialogue. No other project provides so much encouragement.’





# ‘Values are more important than money.’

## Ali Mahmoud



Source: Ali Mahmoud

31-year-old Ali Mahmoud grew up in a neighbourhood of Beirut where he had little contact with people of other religions. He had actually wanted to become a banker – until he found out about the work of a non-governmental organisation (NGO) called the Adyan Foundation. The NGO uses the inclusive citizenship approach to promote inclusion, diversity and spiritual solidarity in Lebanon, a country plagued by civil war and religious conflict. ‘Suddenly I began asking myself questions such as why should I be right and not the others? I realised then that I didn’t really want to work in a bank,’ remembers Ali. Through his work in the Adyan Foundation, he has come to learn what is truly important to him and that his way of thinking was also influenced by stereotypes.

‘I never really had much to do with religion. I didn’t want to be pushed into a particular group and I thought what does it matter, we’re all just people.’ One day, he came across a bus driver on his way to a workshop. ‘I heard the bus driver say to another man, “He’s a Sunni, but he’s nice.” This opened Ali’s eyes. He now believes that it is important to get to know members of other religions so that we can form our own impressions and not fall for politicians who exploit people’s ignorance and fears for their own machinations.

Through the workshops held by the Adyan Foundation and other NGOs, he says he has noticed how much of everyday life is coloured by prejudice. Ali gave up studying finance to



become a trainer and impart his knowledge to others and he has not regretted this decision. 'I've realised that values are more important to me than money.' Ali has found his vocation. He initially took a job as a community engagement coordinator with the Adyan Foundation and would like to continue to stay involved.

He heard about iDove through his work and applied to take part in one of the youth forums in Addis Ababa. 'It dealt with rehabilitation and integration and how to prevent violent extremism. I found that really good. I observed a great deal of conflict and extremism in my youth. It's important to work with young people,' explains Ali. What he particularly likes about iDove are the interesting people and the networking opportunities available to him through the project. He even got talking to a former Salafi through the Cool Imam project and met a priest who had previously been a soldier. 'You learn so much through these encounters,' enthuses Ali.

He is still part of an Arabic-language WhatsApp group for iDovers and hopes to attend further iDove conferences in the future.



**‘I’ve learned so much from iDove. The most important things have been diversity and respect.’**

### Mary Mwachiti



Source: GIZ

Mary Mwachiti has lots to do in Kwale County, located some 30 kilometres from Mombasa, where the young Kenyan woman is involved in peace work at grassroots level. Armed groups such as the Al-Shabaab militia have been spreading violent extremism in the region for some years now, with young people the most likely to be susceptible.

Traditional leaders who want to preserve their natural religions are particularly exposed to attacks by young militants. ‘Young people used to listen to them – the elders would tell stories and pass on their knowledge and wisdom to younger generations in this way,’ remembers Mary. Nowadays, there is an increasing tendency among the elderly to withdraw from community life. While she was able to spend a lot of time playing outdoors as a child and went in and out of neighbours’ houses, people no longer simply go out onto the street or visit neighbours these days as they fear the increasing influence of violent and extremist groups. There are repeated incidents of attacks, human rights violations and violent clashes with many deaths – and Mary’s friends have numbered among the casualties. Despite the everyday dangers, Mary decided to stay, however. ‘I felt a responsibility for my family and my fellow human beings,’ she says. ‘I wanted change. I wanted everything to be normal again, for people to be happy again.’

With support from iDove, Mary has launched a project that aims to promote a sense of reconciliation between the different generations in the community. The project draws on the storytelling tradition. ‘We have brought together different people in the county: traditional and religious leaders, women, people with disabilities, young people and representatives of local government. We wanted to see where things had gone





Source: GIZ

wrong and what had caused the division,' she explains. The intention is to encourage critical thinking, communicate approaches for preventing violent extremism and strengthen social cohesion. Mary also uses social media, radio talk shows, Facebook chats and photo shoots for this, as they allow her to better reach young people while showing older people new ways of sharing knowledge. Through the internet, she can even reach people in remote regions who otherwise could not benefit from what the project offers. She says that some participants also find it easier to speak about their problems and worries online.

Mary organises what are known as police cafés in Kwale County, which bring together young people and local police. 'They are enemies,' she explains. In the café sessions, the participants can talk about their negative experiences, restore lost trust and find ways to cooperate. 'This is also helping us to make life safer for the people here.'

iDove gives her a way to continue her peacebuilding work beyond her home city: Mary is supporting iDove's Training of Trainers (ToT) for the prevention of violent extremism in places such as the Ugandan capital Kampala. By sharing her knowledge through a ToT course, she has even been able to connect with young people also suffering under violence perpetrated by extremist groups on the Philippine island of Mindanao.

'I've learned so much from iDove,' says Mary. 'The most important things have been diversity and respect. With these two values, we iDovers of different faiths and cultures from all over the world have succeeded in sticking together for many years and mutually advocating for this one magnificent goal: peace.'



# JOINT ACTION

# Involving Young People


Violent extremism is not limited to people of a particular age, gender, religion or group. However, young people in particular are frequently affected by violent extremism. It is not uncommon for them to be the victims of violent conflict. And often enough it is also young people who join extremist groups due to factors such as high unemployment, economic problems and a lack of education.

Extremist groups exploit this lack of prospects to attract followers. Religious and fundamentalist narratives also play a role. There is rarely just one cause or trigger for radicalisation. The reasons are varied and do not only affect certain groups of people.

But what has to change and how? The answer must be found by working with those involved, not over their heads. Direct cooperation is the only way to break down barriers and show people the opportunities available to them. Many countries around the world have a very young population. Young people have great potential that is often untapped and are frequently much better able to promote a culture of tolerance and peace among their peers.

Nine out of ten people worldwide feel part of a religious, spiritual or indigenous tradition. iDove uses this as a starting point. The multi-religious network brings together young people from all over the world from different backgrounds and with





their own individual stories. They share their experiences, identify common values and network with each other. In an environment marked by mutual trust, the multi-religious network fosters young people and their strengths and gives them the right tools for combating violent extremism in an even more effective and targeted way. Together they take steps to counter the various forms of hatred and violence. However, it is not enough just to combat violent extremism; it also needs to be prevented in the first place. Young people are therefore actively engaged in their communities and make a lasting contribution to cohesion and peace.

iDove builds on existing youth initiatives and supports young people's commitment and ideas for combating extremism and strengthening social cohesion through non-violent solutions. Encounters across religious and national borders help in this aim. The opportunity to connect with others is crucial for dialogue and joint action. iDove creates a safe space for this in which young people can learn with and from each other and develop a sense of belonging and identity.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Allee 36  
53113 Bonn  
T +49 6196 79-4322  
E religionmatters@giz.de  
I www.giz.de  
I www.religion-entwicklung.de

### Project:

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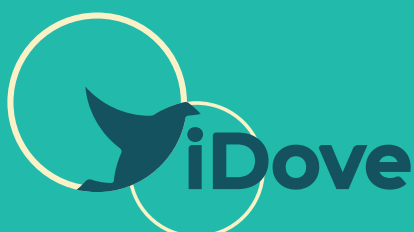
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