

FINAL REPORT: APPLIED RESEARCH PROJECT 27

Mapping Pathways to Peace in the Balkans and Beyond

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Disclaimer

The report reflects the findings of the Applied Research Project based on the Harmony Project's past implementation. The programme continues to expand and evolve internationally, its methodologies, data, implementation approaches, tools, and evaluation framework will continue to be refined. Consequently, some elements described in this report may not fully reflect the current or future iterations of the programme.

Executive Summary

The Balkan region of Eastern Europe presents a number of complex challenges in the peacebuilding process: it is a post-conflict region where communal and ethnic divisions persist over 30 years after the end of the Balkan Wars, hampering the establishment of positive peace.

SANCHILD International's Harmony Project works against this backdrop, empowering NGOs and individuals in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) to work towards grassroots peacebuilding and community healing. Using a train-the-trainer approach, the Project provides participants with the technical knowledge and emotional capacity required to encourage inter-community interaction and promote peace from the ground up. Following their training, the participants went on to conduct Ripple Projects with their communities.

This research sought to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of Harmony's approach, and its impact on communities in BiH. The aim of the analysis is to provide concrete recommendations to SANCHILD in order to enable them to scale up the project to other Balkan countries and beyond. The research used a Theory of Change analytical framework to describe the direction in which the project should go, and what core principles could be effective for it to do so. For this purpose, relevant literature was analyzed and five semi-structured interviews were conducted with former participants of the Harmony Project, who later implemented Ripple Projects using their learnings.

After the analysis, the following inferences were derived inter alia: the project's emphasis on peace at the individual and collective levels resonated with participants, expressing and learning how to process negative emotions was useful, connecting with nature and interacting with diverse groups of participants was beneficial, and a strong, motivated network is required to ensure the continuation of the project's impact. The research team was thus able to conclude that the Harmony Project can be a scalable model for community-led peacebuilding in other regions, provided it is not simply replicated: core principles should be transferred while the structure and nuances should be adapted to the local context.

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Mapping Pathways to Peace in the Balkans and Beyond

1. Introduction

This research aims to strengthen community-led approaches to peacebuilding in the Western Balkan region, building upon the success of the Harmony Project's impact in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) by SANCHILD International. It seeks to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the Harmony Project itself and how these can be adapted so as to create a scalable model to expand in the Balkans and beyond.

1.1. Historical Background: Peace and Conflict in the Western Balkans

The Balkan region has a long history of prolonged social and political conflicts. To understand the Balkans' particularities and effectively implement peacebuilding initiatives, it is essential to comprehend their historical origins.

Before Ottoman rule, medieval states such as Serbia, Bosnia, and Croatia were shaped by political rivalry and cultural exchange. Religious divisions between Orthodox and Catholic Christianity contributed to the emergence of distinct political traditions and identities (Banac, 1984, pp. 21-22). The Ottoman conquest introduced a four-century imperial system that managed religious diversity and ensured stability while reinforcing religious divides, even as Ottoman rule also encouraged cultural blending, urban development, and periods of interfaith coexistence (Sugar, 1977, pp. 5–6). This legacy of coexistence and division remains central to understanding the region's later fragmentation.

The weakening of Ottoman power transformed millions of Muslims from the ruling majority into vulnerable minority communities within new Balkan nation-states, eventually leading to the Balkan Wars (1912–1913) (Belleza, 2022). These preceded the outbreak of World War I, ignited by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo (Glenny, 2012). This period marked the transition from imperial governance to ethnocentric states, a shift that scholars such as Ingrao and Emmert (2012) identify as crucial in the development of mutually exclusive national narratives.

During World War II, the region was fragmented by fascist occupations, with collaborationist regimes committing atrocities against Jews and minorities (Hoare, 2013). Simultaneously, partisan resistance under Josip Broz Tito promoted a new Yugoslav identity rooted in antifascism and unity. This moment is often viewed as a turning point, as it introduced the idea of a supranational identity as a solution to ethnic division (Ramet, 2006).

Following the war, Tito's Yugoslavia became a socialist federation emphasizing "brotherhood and unity" (Ramet, 2006). Ethnic coexistence was largely successful due to federal autonomy and socioeconomic progress (Ramet, 2006). However, this unity has been debated. Notably, Ingrao and Emmett (2012) argue that Yugoslavia's underlying weaknesses (political illegitimacy, economic decline, and the failure to create a shared identity) remained unresolved. Instead of eliminating ethno-nationalism, the system suppressed it, leading to contestation following Tito's death in 1980. These unresolved tensions intensified, culminating in the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s and the collapse of the state (Ingrao and Emmert, 2012).

While the wars concluded with the signing of the Dayton Accords in 1995, the underlying ethnic tensions were not resolved. The post-conflict reconstruction efforts are ongoing to address this issue, since the accords failed to address the root causes of division and, instead, institutionalized ethnic fragmentation (Szasz, 1997; Bojičić-Dželilović and Kostovicova, 2010). Chandler (2000) similarly critiques the externally imposed political system, suggesting it fostered dependency and undermined genuine democratic development. These perspectives highlight how the legacy of conflict continues to shape governance structures in the Balkans.

More recently, attention has shifted to the role of external actors, particularly the European Union (EU). For instance, Ağır, Arman, and Akçay (2019) argue that the EU conditionality has produced what they term "procedural peace," a fragile stability maintained through external incentives rather than genuine reconciliation. This critique is reinforced at the global level by Bieber (2020), who demonstrates how competing influences from Russia, China, and Turkey interact with EU efforts, often reinforcing nationalist and illiberal tendencies. In this context, the Western Balkans has gained renewed strategic importance for European security, particularly following the Ukraine war, making EU integration a higher

priority (Shaban, 2025). However, this raises an important question within the literature, whether such integration can address the deep-rooted causes of conflict, or whether it will merely sustain the pattern of superficial stability identified by earlier scholars.

Overall, the history of the Western Balkans reveals a persistent tension between coexistence and division, shaped by imperial legacies, nationalist projects, and external interventions. This complex history emphasizes that while the region has achieved periods of stability, the underlying drivers of conflict remain insufficiently resolved. Understanding this intertwined historical and analytical trajectory is essential for achieving lasting peace and regional stability.

1.2. Geographical Overview of the Balkan Peninsula

The Balkan Peninsula is one of Europe's four major peninsulas and described as the area bridging Europe and Asia (Gibas-Krzak, 2020). It covers roughly 550,000 sq. km and comprises the former Yugoslav states of BiH, Kosovo, Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Slovenia. Its long history of political volatility has also shaped and politicized the meaning of the term 'Balkan'.

The region geographically stretches from the Danube–Sava river system in the west to the Danube delta in the east, with Cape Matapan in Greece marking its southern edge (Gibas-Krzak, 2020). These borders reflect the conventional geographic definition, while the political idea of the 'Balkans' is more limited and contested. The peninsula contains diverse landscapes, from the Stara Planina mountain range, which runs 560 km from the Croatia, Montenegro and Albanian border to the Adriatic Sea, to the Black Sea coastline of Romania and Bulgaria (Todorova, 1997). This environment supports rich biodiversity and several protected areas.

Endowed with significant natural resources and located at a strategic juncture, the region is geopolitically important as the EU responds to shifting security dynamics. Yet persistent political, economic, and social instabilities still challenge the peninsula.

1.3. Current Importance of the Balkan Conflict

Decades after the end of the Balkan wars, deep divisions remain entrenched in the region. Ethnic divisions prevail in citizens' everyday lives: in BiH, for example, where the temporary “two schools under one roof¹” arrangement has taken root in approximately 50 establishments (Sénécal, 2022). This institutionalised segregation reflects the broader challenges of post-war reconciliation and the persistence of ethno-nationalist narratives. Similar tensions can be observed in Kosovo, where the government's choices to centralize power revive ethnic hatred (International Crisis Group, 2025). In other words, relations between neighboring countries remain on edge, with recurrent political disputes and historical grievances impeding the creation of positive peace in the region.

The international community is not shielded from these tensions either, as an increase in community fragmentations can be observed around the globe. It is therefore essential to consider how global political and economic dynamics, including EU and neighboring power strategies, security and energy dependencies, migration regimes, and information ecosystems, influence local conflict drivers and peacebuilding opportunities.

With these divisions increasing, it is possible to believe that the top-down method used by the international community trying to resolve the issues is rather ineffective. A prime example would be the failure of the Dayton Accords: while stopping the war, it created long-term structural failures by not tackling the root causes of the conflict (Ingrao and Emmett, 2012). Therefore, addressing the region's enduring fragmentation requires a shift toward grounded, community-driven strategies that empower citizens to engage in dialogue, rebuild trust, and construct inclusive political and social structures capable of overcoming entrenched ethnic boundaries. In sum, a change is needed in the usual response of the international community to establish lasting peace in places with identity-segregated divisions.

¹ This is a system where children of different ethnic backgrounds attend the same school buildings but are taught separately (different curricula with different books) (Sénécal, 2022).

1.4. Relevance of the Research Question

As contemporary peacebuilding grows increasingly important, this research analyzes mechanisms by asking how the community-led approaches of the Harmony Project in BiH foster positive peace. Mechanisms such as trust-building, dialogue, and cooperation remain undervalued compared to international political agreements. This addresses the present situation of ethnically divided schools, segregated public spaces, and entrenched narratives. Examining how these approaches can be adapted and scaled to other contexts in the region and beyond is crucial to demonstrate that these methods are transferable. The main research questions therefore are:

How can the Harmony Project contribute to positive peace and support long-term coexistence in divided communities and how can this be scaled across the Balkans and beyond?

2. Literature Review

In order to conduct effective research into the subject matter for this project, it is necessary to understand the work of relevant stakeholders within the context of the region and their practical engagement with conflicted societies. This section reviews existing literature to form a strong base upon which to build this project. For this purpose, existing literature has been broadly divided into three sections: the meaning and implications of “positive peacebuilding”, approaches toward peace and community healing, and on-field accounts and advice on working in conflict regions and scenarios. The works under each section contribute to laying the ground for developing a context-specific Theory of Change for SANCHILD International’s “Together for Harmony in the Balkans and Beyond” program, which aims to examine the root causes of polarization and techniques of scaling up the Harmony Project in BiH to the other Balkan countries.

2.1. The Meaning and Implications of Positive Peacebuilding

This project seeks to understand how community-led approaches in post-conflict situations contribute to the development of positive peace. Before examining this approach through the perspectives of Harmony Project participants, it is necessary to clarify what “positive peacebuilding” means within this context.

This project utilises the concept of positive peace for practical and research purposes, as defined by Johan Galtung (2011) in his seminal work, *Peace, Positive and Negative*. This defines positive peace as not just the absence of war, but also of structural violence in a society. This goes beyond the mainstream understanding of peace in that it also accounts for structural factors that contribute to long-lasting peace, such as systemic inequality and unaddressed community grievances (Galtung, 2011). This approach is particularly useful in the Balkan context, as it is a conflict that has frameworks and, historically, the political will required to stop violence, but this has not led to harmonious coexistence, as was envisioned. Galtung’s definition of positive peace helps us move past the peace agreement and address the structural violence that continues to proliferate in society and prevent community harmony.

Further research on positive and negative peace reveals the strengths of this approach. Paul Diehl's work, *Exploring Peace: Looking Beyond War and Negative Peace* (2016), critiques the traditional emphasis in international studies on war and negative peace, defined simply as the absence of war. Diehl finds that this conventional conceptualization limits research and leads to "absurd categorizations." The Balkans are a good example of this. He advocates for a greater scholarly focus on positive peace, a concept that incorporates elements such as extensive cooperation and integration, security, development, human rights, equity, and justice.

Johanna Rodehau-Noack (2024) examines the historical process through which war became constituted as a preventable problem accessible to international governance, utilizing an object-centered approach to International Relations. She traces war's constitution through three interrelated processes: first, designating war as an epistemic/scientific object amenable to systematic investigation, supported by pacifists and philanthropists who funded the nascent "science of peace"; second, this object was translated across contexts through quantification (compiling statistics on costs, casualty counts, and military expenditures) thereby creating a measurable and global phenomenon that serves as an object of expertise for policy design; third, peace advocates problematized war as a governance object by framing it as a costly problem that reverses economic development, emphasizing prevention as a rational and cost-effective strategy. By transforming war into an undesirable but knowable and calculable entity, these efforts entrenched prevention as the ideal course of action for international governance.

While Rodehau-Noack's work traces the understanding of war in policy, Galtung and Diehl trace the understanding of peace itself. Specifically, they critique the current approaches to both war and peace, deeming them limiting in their applications to real-world conflicts. This makes the processes of both working with and resolving conflicts inadequate in current times.

2.2. Approaches Towards Peace and Community Healing

On the surface, it appears as if there is no conflict left in the Balkans, as the Yugoslav wars are over and no overt warfare is actively taking place (Dželilović & Kostovicova, 2010).

However, as the authors from the previous section demonstrate, ‘peace’ goes beyond the mere absence of war. Hence, it becomes important to take a closer look at what is implied by peace, and what characteristics of positive peace the Harmony Project aims to achieve in the Balkan society. For this purpose, this section examines some of the literature on the varied approaches to community healing, which the Harmony Project ultimately aims to achieve.

Giovanni P. Dazzo (2024) provides an easily comprehensible introduction to the idea of community healing. Reimagining a healing and restorative space for healing, his work forms the basis for an axiologically-actuated conceptual model, restorative validity, which asks what it would take to (re)humanize researcher and researched alike. By doing so, he provides a reflective space both for the participants in the healing exercise and those facilitating it, recasting the process as a community healing experience for everyone instead of an externally imposed process. This perspective proves extremely useful for the Harmony Project, as most of the formal mechanisms for peace in the Balkans have been externally imposed (such as the Dayton Accords) and so can potentially generate a feeling of alienation from their own peace among the community. Dazzo’s approach, which the Harmony Project also utilises, aims to reorient this.

Scherto R Gill (2025) argues that addressing enduring harms requires collective healing, involving processes of acknowledging the wounds, truth-telling, reparations, reconciliation, and inclusive dialogue across diverse generations and communities. Gill presents a number of innovative frameworks to facilitate this process, including “Emotional Justice”, which emphasizes relational well-being and narrative transformation, and “Intergenerational Dialogue and Inquiry,” which reaffirms human dignity and restores traditional wisdom and communal resilience. Gill also examines ideas of “healing architecture” and “politics of dignity” that outline structural features of a just society, showing how institutions can be intentionally designed to respect the equal intrinsic value of all persons, nurture social justice, and foster collective well-being.

Beltrán et. al. (2025) discuss the importance of oral histories and inter-community dialogue for community healing. Through the framework of critical feminist and Indigenist research principles, they stress the centrality of oral history that is shared between communities across social divisions in order to foster understanding and generate empathy.

They utilize psychotherapy-adjacent practices like ceremonial prompts, moments of pause and introspection, and invitations to share experiences, to prompt such dialogue in a meaningful direction. Interacting with each other is the only way in which communities can reconcile their differences and find ways to move past their trauma, and the authors feel that this approach is unfortunately missing from many truth and reconciliation processes, even the most well-intentioned.

Finally, bringing this section back to its origin point on BiH, Sara Clarke-Habibi (2005) writes on the as-yet untapped potential of education for peacebuilding in the country. She argues that current approaches to peace education tend to focus on specific issues or themes and leave many broader questions about the nature of peace and the means for its lasting establishment in human individual and collective life unanswered. Particularly in the contexts of injustice, violence, and war, peace education programs that have the power to transform worldviews from a conflict orientation to a peace orientation are needed. Using the example of another grassroots program called *Education for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina* that has demonstrated transformative results in inter-community and intra-community relations, Clarke-Habibi discusses how education about each other and ourselves can be an important avenue for community healing as well.

The lessons learned from these works are clearly invaluable for the work of the Harmony Project, as it rests on a similar approach to build resilient community bonds from the ground up. An externally imposed peace process may have worked to curb immediate violence, but if peace in the sense defined above is to be achieved, one must be prompted to look beyond one's biases and work towards fostering connections within and outside one's communities, share stories, and learn from each other.

2.3. Working Towards Peace in Conflict-Affected Areas

Creating sustainable peace in volatile regions is delicate work. Much has been written about working with conflict-affected communities worldwide. This section attempts to review some of these works to inform the research and guide the data collection process.

Fisher et al. (2000) provide a practical manual for conflict transformation using participatory tools such as conflict mapping, negotiation, and dialogue facilitation in their book, *Working with Conflict: Skills and Strategies for Action*. This focuses on real-time implementation of conflict mitigation strategies in order to ensure maximum effectiveness. Lederach (2005) tries to balance techniques and process management on one hand and the necessity to find the heart and soul of the creative process in peace building on the other. Lederach (1999) takes this one step further by calling for a multidimensional approach to peacebuilding, moving beyond mere diplomacy focused on ceasefires and settlements. He emphasizes that genuine peacebuilding is a holistic and long-term process that must address deep-rooted hatred, fear, and systemic issues. Woodrow and Chigas (2009) also focus on the methodological and ethical underpinnings of peacebuilding. Their distinction between conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding highlights that genuine transformation demands more than avoiding harm; it requires intentional engagement with conflict dynamics and local relationships.

This approach aligns with that of the Harmony Project, which seeks to move beyond political influence, ceasefires, and peace agreements (which, as demonstrated above, have not enacted long-term change) and towards addressing deeper societal issues in the Balkans. The Harmony Project's target is to focus on a bottom-up approach to build positive peace through individuals, communities, and eventually, societies.

Bringing the discussion back to the Balkans, Džuverović (2021) revisits the “local turn” debate in her article, *To romanticise or not to romanticise the local: Local agency and peacebuilding in the Balkans*. She cautions against romanticizing community actors as inherently peace-oriented. Drawing on examples from post-Dayton BiH and donor-driven Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) initiatives, she demonstrates that local agency operates within complex structures of external funding and domestic power asymmetry. On a narrower scale, Mironova and Whitt (2017) test the effect of peacekeeping on interpersonal trust in Kosovo. They find that enforcement mechanisms promote short-term cooperation, but trust declines once external monitoring ends. This is a key finding for the research, as the Harmony Project aims to enact long-term change even after external enforcement and

peacekeeping mechanisms have ended. The ToC for this project must take into account the lasting effects (or lack thereof) of externally imposed monitoring in the conflict region.

The works above have broad focus areas, but they address crucial aspects of working in conflict-affected regions to facilitate positive peace. The Balkans can also be viewed through this framework, understanding peacebuilding in the region as a long process defined by more than just peace agreements and monitoring. Initiatives like the Harmony Project go deeper in terms of the meaning of peace itself and involve local communities to create a shared vision of sustainable peace for the region.

3. Framework : Theory of Change

The analytical framework examines how Harmony's community-led activities contribute to positive peace and how these mechanisms can be adapted across the Balkans and beyond. The framework conceptualizes change as a process that begins at the individual level and gradually expands outward to relationships and communities. Hence, the Theory of Change for this project is that if individuals are provided with safe, community-led spaces for reflection, dialogue, and cooperation, they will develop greater trust, openness, and empathy toward others, and they will become more engaged in collective action and community initiatives across social divisions. This will then contribute to stronger social cohesion, reduced fragmentation, and ultimately to sustainable positive peace. More precisely, it can be developed into three components.

First, positive peace is defined as reconnection with oneself, improvements in attitude (trust, openness), and behavior (interactions, cooperation). Rather than understanding peace solely as the absence of violence or as an institutional outcome, this framework emphasizes individual and relational transformation as foundational to sustainable peace (Galtung, 2011). This reflects the goal of fostering healing, reducing social fragmentation, and strengthening local capacities for peaceful coexistence. The Harmony approach shows early evidence of this transformation by creating a space that is connected with nature. The distance from the pressures of urban everyday life allows participants to experience moments of calm in which trauma could gradually be felt and processed within a safe environment. It allows people to be vulnerable and to find inner balance. This personal dimension is a necessary precondition for engaging with others, since emotional safety and self-awareness enable openness, empathy, and trust-building. This facilitates connecting with other people and groups, as shown in the train-the-trainer seminars. In this sense, the framework conceptualizes peacebuilding as a progression from inner transformation to relational engagement, where personal awareness and emotional openness form the basis for building trust and meaningful interactions with others.

Second, it identifies key drivers through which Harmony appears to generate change. This begins with local ownership, which enables sustainability and legitimacy. Local ownership is critical in ensuring that participants act as agents of change rather than passive

recipients, thereby strengthening both commitment and long-term impact (Džuverović, 2021). It is followed by interpersonal trust-building, allowing dialogue to function. Trust is understood here as a gradual and relational process that develops through repeated interactions within safe and facilitated environments (Mironova & Whitt, 2017). These repeated interactions reduce fear and social distance between participants, thereby creating conditions in which dialogue can move beyond formal exchange toward deeper emotional engagement. Once dialogue is established, it creates space for cooperation, which can then lead to problem-solving and collective action. The Harmony Project's trainers also play a key role as facilitators of safe spaces, enabling the emotional engagement required to initiate the process. In this sense, trainers function as knowledge transmitters and relational facilitators who support both personal reflection and group interaction.

These mechanisms are visible in the train-the-trainers model as well as in the Ripple Projects, and together reveal that the process is cumulative rather than linear. The Ripple Projects are especially important here, as they transfer practices and forms of engagement developed during the seminars into local communities and everyday social contexts. This progression illustrates how individual-level change can expand into collective processes, as trust and dialogue create the conditions for cooperation and community-based action. Rather than remaining limited to personal experiences, these interactions can gradually contribute to broader local networks of cooperation and engagement.

Third, the framework considers conditions that influence the transferability of the Harmony Project across the Western Balkans and beyond. Transferability is not just replication but adaptation to different contexts. This implies that practices and mechanisms developed within the Harmony Project cannot simply be transferred unchanged, but must be adjusted to local historical experiences, social relations, and political realities. In this context, three conditions are revealed to be particularly decisive. First is the presence of a functioning local base, which is essential as the approach relies on individuals capable of carrying and sustaining the process. Without locally engaged actors and networks, the practices developed during the seminars are unlikely to continue beyond the immediate project setting. Second is the space for engagement that allows for dialogue at the community level, even within constrained political environments. Such spaces are important because they create

opportunities for continued interaction and trust-building beyond temporary workshop settings. Third is the shared understanding of the project's purpose, which is necessary to ensure meaningful participation and avoid superficial engagement. Where these conditions are not met, the potential for effective scaling remains limited. This suggests that transferability depends less on reproducing identical project structures and more on maintaining the underlying relational mechanisms within different contexts.

Together, these components illustrate a multi-level process of change through which the Harmony approach contributes to positive peace. The process begins with community-led activities (train-the-trainers seminars and Ripple Project) that create safe spaces for reflection, vulnerability, and dialogue. This assists each participant to develop greater self-awareness, emotional balance, trust, and openness toward others, thereby strengthening interpersonal relationships through empathy, dialogue, and cooperation across social divisions. As trust expands from the individual to the collective level, participants become more engaged in, among others, collective initiatives and local problem-solving. This facilitates community engagements through, among others, collective initiatives and local problem-solving. Over time, these processes contribute to broader social impacts, including reduced social fragmentation, stronger social cohesion, and increased local capacity for peaceful coexistence.

Therefore, the Harmony Project conceptualizes peacebuilding as a reinforcing cycle in which inner transformation supports relational change, relational change enables community action, and community action contributes to sustainable positive peace.

4. Methodology

This methodology is designed to answer the main research questions: *How can Harmony Project contribute to positive peace and support long-term coexistence in divided communities, and how can this be scaled across the Balkans and beyond?* The research design aligns with these questions by combining qualitative methods, multiple sources of evidence, and a structured approach to analyzing community-based mechanisms that support long-term peace. As Harmony Project seeks to transform relationships through community-led engagement, this methodology centers on examining how various participants employ its mechanisms and identifying the trends for transferability in other contexts.

The available sources are the Harmony Project evaluation report, employees, trainers, and previous surveys. This also includes the Ripple Projects evaluation and previous interviews. The research team will also conduct an informal interview with the program evaluator who evaluated the Harmony Project in 2021. This will provide insights that will inform the questionnaire used for the interviews. All these sources will be provided by SANCHILD. While interacting directly with the recipients of the Harmony Project is important to gauge its community impact, this may not be practically feasible, given the timeline and resources available. Hence, this is a source that the researchers may not analyze.

Such a subjective project also runs the risk of bias, which may creep in both from the researchers' point of view and the sources themselves. This may take the form of response and social desirability biases and selection bias. It is important to bear this in mind and work to minimize biases by incorporating a variety of perspectives in the research and eliminating bias, to the extent possible.

4.1. Methods

Qualitative methods are suitable for this research because they allow the researcher to access subjective experiences, informal social dynamics, and historically embedded forms of mistrust that cannot be captured through quantitative indicators (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Conflict transformation depends on relationships, perceptions of legitimacy, and community trust: phenomena that unfold in complex, non-linear ways and require interpretive approaches

(Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2016). Qualitative inquiry thus enables a deeper, context-sensitive understanding of how actors perceive the Harmony Project's mechanisms, where they see opportunities for adaptation, and what contextual barriers may impede successful transfer.

Furthermore, adopting a qualitative strategy relates to the normative dimension of peacebuilding. Local actors in divided societies often have limited opportunities to articulate their own needs. Qualitative interviews allow these voices to inform the analysis directly, creating a bottom-up understanding of peacebuilding processes (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). In addition, the project operates in settings shaped by emotionally charged histories, trauma, and complex interethnic relations. Such environments require methods that are capable of capturing nuance and ambiguity (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2015). For these reasons, qualitative research provides the most appropriate methodological foundation for assessing the Harmony Project and its potential regional transfer.

This component involves gathering empirical insights through five semi-structured expert interviews. Expert interviews are well-suited for political and policy-oriented research because they provide access to specialized knowledge that may not be documented in written sources (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2009). The experts interviewed for this study are Harmony Project participants, also referred to in this report as Harmony alumni. The sample consists of five participants selected by SANCHILD based on their direct involvement in the Harmony Project, ensuring access to actors with first-hand experience of implementation and peacebuilding activities (Gerring, 2017; Seawright & Gerring, 2008).

The interviews aim to explore how participants assess the Harmony Project's achievements since the start of the project, what challenges they encounter in their respective contexts, and what conditions they consider necessary for transferring the approach. They also allow for comparison between the internal logic of the project and the realities of local implementation.

Because these experts often work in sensitive environments, semi-structured interviews provide the flexibility to probe carefully while allowing participants to introduce perspectives not anticipated in advance (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). As all interviewees stem

from the project network, the sample may display a shared community-peacebuilding orientation and thus not fully represent the broader population (Tracy, 2010; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2015). However, this selection strategy may also introduce organizational or normative biases, making critical interpretation and triangulation necessary to maintain analytical rigor (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Saldaña, 2016).

The research process involves several sequential steps that ensure methodological rigor and ethical compliance. It begins with the development of a theory-informed interview guide, which draws on established peacebuilding literature as well as the specific objectives of examining the transferability of the Harmony Project. This is followed by the preparation of consent forms and confidentiality agreements that align with recognised standards of research ethics, as outlined by Tracy (2010). Five semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with practitioners. Each interview will be recorded only after explicit consent has been obtained from the participant, reflecting the sensitive political and social environments in which many of these actors work. All interviews will be transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and transparency in the subsequent analysis. The resulting digital data will be stored in secure, encrypted formats in order to protect participant identity and comply with ethical requirements.

The interview guide is structured according to well-established categories of qualitative questioning described by Kaiser (2014), including introductory, structuring, direct, indirect, specific, and interpretive questions. This framework enables systematic comparison across interviews, while also allowing flexibility to explore unanticipated themes that emerge during conversation. Interviews were conducted either online, considering the logistical feasibility, safety considerations, and the preferences of each participant. Throughout the research process, and particularly given the region's historical sensitivity around political and ethnic issues, the researcher will engage in reflexive practice. This includes taking field notes during and immediately after each interview to record contextual details, emotional cues, and unexpected insights that may influence the data interpretation. Such reflexivity contributes to a more transparent and nuanced understanding of the interview material and supports the interpretive depth required for this study.

Preparatory materials provided by SANCHILD, including internal evaluations, previous interview responses, and discussions with an external evaluator, informed the development of the interview guide. Transcribed interviews will undergo thematic analysis following a multi-stage coding procedure (Saldaña, 2016). The analysis followed a structured, theme-oriented approach aligned with the interview guide. Interview material was reviewed, and relevant excerpts were organized into thematic categories. Rather than applying a formalized coding scheme, the analysis remained grounded in participants' own words, using selected quotations to illustrate key themes while preserving contextual nuance.

4.2. Expected Outputs

From this research, the research team will develop a Theory of Change, connecting goals, interventions, and outcomes, and that is both context-specific and scalable. This Theory of Change will inform SANCHILD International's proposal to the Rotary Foundation for the Global Grant. A final report detailing the research will be carried out, which will support the full proposal and form the strategic backbone of the program. Finally, the team will compose a concise summary based on the research for the Rotary Foundation, in accordance with the required criteria of SANCHILD (to obtain the Global Grant).

4.3. Limitations

This research might face some limitations that the researchers need to address before starting. First, the output needed from the interviews may not be as desired. However, this could be mitigated by having clear expectations from the interviewees and framing questions according to what they can inform on. The questions will also be reviewed by the Program Evaluator and SANCHILD. Second, the collected data might not represent the majority, because of the limited sample size of participants. However, it is alleviated because of the participants' expertise as trainers. Third, there is a data quality risk, which means inconsistencies and errors in the collected data (interviews). Without a sufficiently large number of interviews, inconsistencies may arise in participants' responses due to factors such as differing experiences, social desirability bias, or response bias. Nevertheless, increasing the amount of data and perspectives will reduce the risk of inconsistencies and biases. Finally, there is a risk of individual bias; however, the team's diverse backgrounds provide

counterbalancing perspectives that help reduce this. Additionally, the interviews will be conducted in randomized pairs, and the work will be divided among the team.

4.4. Research Ethical Protocol

The study is designed to protect the dignity, rights, safety, and well-being of all participants, so that the highest ethical standards are upheld. Before the researchers begin the interview process, all required procedures will be followed to obtain approval for conducting research involving participants. Participants will receive a clear Terms of Reference document outlining the purpose of the research, the nature of their involvement, and their rights, including the right to decline participation, withdraw at any time, or discontinue the interview without any consequences. Moreover, a legally sound and approved consent form will be developed in accordance with the Geneva Graduate Institute Research Ethics Guidelines. Finally, to protect participant confidentiality, the data will be collected anonymously by giving all participants labels that prevent the identification of individuals. The data will be securely stored on Leaf, the Institute's authorized data-storage platform, in accordance with institutional data-protection standards.

5. Analysis

This analysis draws from the semi-structured interviews conducted by the research team with alumni from the Harmony Project. The participants were asked about their connection to the project, its ways of working, and what stood out to them, the benefits they derived from it, the challenges they faced, etc. to get a holistic picture of the working of the project so as to enable its expansion. A total of five Harmony alumni were interviewed. This section analyzes their responses with reference to six common themes.

5.1. Entry and Personal Engagement

The participants displayed personal connections to the Harmony Project. The practical way that they had the opportunity to participate was through social media. SANCHILD put out an open call for NGOs and civil society organizations, and the participants applied through this. A Harmony alumnus explained:

"Throughout one of their projects (the Harmony Project that they have started) [...] they had a call for all the NGOs or all the activists that were interested [to] join."

Selected participants then met each other and the organizers from SANCHILD through a virtual meeting, and subsequently, physical sessions were arranged in BiH for the training. Many of the participants had positive views of the site itself (in Srebrenica). An alumnus described it as:

"a beautiful place surrounded by woods and forestry," and "a place of nature."

This location was key to the effectiveness of the project: the presence of nature and the physical separation from the participants' daily lives worked to immerse them fully in the project. Some participants suggested that access to calm and restorative natural spaces facilitated openness, reflection, and interpersonal connection, which indicates that the environmental setting may contribute indirectly to emotional regulation and trust-building.

Following the training, the participants went on to lead Ripple Projects, wherein they applied their learnings from the training to their peacebuilding work with their own communities. These projects targeted different groups: one participant worked to rekindle bonds between mothers and daughters, while others worked with young children, for instance. The projects arose from familiarity: one, a high school teacher and Harmony alumnus, worked to inculcate mindfulness practices among their own students.

It is evident that the Harmony Project rests on a foundation of grassroots peacebuilding: by involving local NGOs and activists to create a robust framework and tasking them with disseminating it among their communities, the project not only covers a lot of ground but also enables local actors to initiate local peacebuilding processes. Because participants could choose to attend the Harmony Project and then apply their learnings in their Ripple Project, it acted as a force-multiplier for their motivation. The Project's methodology also reinforced its participatory nature.

5.2. Core Mechanisms of Harmony

As explained, the Harmony Project employs a train-the-trainer approach, empowering NGOs and activists who later work with their communities. In the training itself, much emphasis is placed upon peace at all levels. An alumnus said:

“A Harmony-like program is concentrating on peace. Peace with the world, peace with yourself, peace with others.”

The participants found this particularly effective, as it created a situation where their work to bring peace within themselves could then be projected outwards to bring peace in their communities. The alumnus reasoned:

“...you must be good with yourself in order to produce a good impact in the community and to leave a good impact to your target group.”

The project also focused on emotions, and the value of addressing negative emotions. The alumni felt this was useful, as their societies do not openly discuss emotions and mental health. An alumnus said on what makes the project stand out to them:

“ People do not talk about themselves. People do not talk about mental health, mindfulness, and other things... When it comes to Harmony, the focus was on [...] mental health, it was on how to make yourself more relaxed.”

Another merit of the project was that it ensured diversity of representation at all stages. Any peacebuilding process in a country as diverse as BiH must account for and include this diversity in order to bring real change. Consequently, activists and NGOs from different communities and parts of the country were selected for the project. The trainers, too, were brought in from different parts of the world (participants mentioned South Africa and the United Kingdom). An alumnus explained:

“During the program we had trainers coming from different parts of the world [...] they have brought different styles, living styles, as well as a manner of communication.”

This helped break down barriers to community interaction and trained participants to work with people from different backgrounds and ways of working, which they found useful in their Ripple Projects.

In this way, the Harmony Project worked to make participants comfortable with their emotions and to build trust among each other and in themselves as well. Participants felt that trust is a vital element of this project, as without it, communication becomes ineffective, and bridges cannot be built between communities. These core mechanisms become visible in the implementation of the project.

5.3. Implementation and Local Ownership

A recurring theme throughout the interviews is that implementation is not random, but based on structured training and then adapted to the local context. The skills the alumni acquired after their training were then used for their Ripple Project, as we can see with the extract of one interview:

“We never ended because the program that we went through was actually the program that we were equipped with these skills to implement these workshops that we have learned during this teacher training program.”

After their training program, they implemented Ripple Projects in different locations with children and teenagers. The interviews also show that implementation is tailored to local context and groups, which brings balance between a standardized foundation and local flexibility. An interviewee mentioned that one of their projects was to assist the Roma population with their emotions:

“I tried to make some a safe place for those children to open up and work on some tough subjects in Bosnia because the children in Bosnia, and I think in the Balkans in general, they don't have that luxury to think about their emotions. And marginalized groups such as a Roma population that I worked with, and I tried to inspire them and motivate them to just recognize the emotions and try to have some kind of control.”

Hence, interviewees understood specific vulnerabilities that the children and teenagers were experiencing, and they adapted their methods to the social realities. Besides, the implementation of Ripple Projects is mainly centred on soft skills and emotion management, as many of the interviewees discussed. They share a methodological core of emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and well-being practices, which enables them to address topics such as mental health. As one of the interviewees put it:

“Let's say intentions of bringing more harmony, going deeper into your coherence, and also demonstrating some touch work in front of the group also.”

This suggests that, with its general methods, the model was successfully implemented because of local adaptation. However, it is possible to see, across the interviews, that there are challenges: handling a group of twenty people, getting the group to open up, and being trusted. One interviewee recalled:

“[...] and at the beginning it was a bit hard because they weren't so open, but I also had a help with a local staff [...] but as the project was going on, they were opening up and I could play with them, speak with them and even after the project activities, I've continued being in touch with some of them [...]”

It is possible to observe that, with time and the assistance of local colleagues, the interviewee was able to connect with the teenagers, with whom they still have relationships today. The project was successful because he was able to adjust his methods to the context and to use the local network that he had. Finally, implementations have an impact on the children and teenagers as well as on the participants. One interviewee explained:

“[...] it had this kind of influence on [...] personal level because you have acquired some methodologies that are helping you also in your private life but also in your work because you have to open aspects that are needed to be worked on, that you have neglected so far.”

The local ownership, being both professional and personal, reinforces the program's impact and the strength of the implementation since the participants are more engaged.

Overall, the interviews demonstrate that implementation is a dynamic process grounded in structured training but shaped by local realities. The Ripple Projects' strength lies in their ability to combine a shared methodological framework with context-specific adaptations, allowing participants to respond to the particular needs of their target groups. Ultimately, this process not only ensures the sustainability of the projects but also amplifies their impact, as both beneficiaries and participants experience meaningful personal and social transformation.

5.4. Diversity, Emotional Sensitivity, and Risk Management

Another recurring aspect highlighted by the interviewees is the normalization of diversity (ethnic and religious) within the program. Diversity is present, but it is not experienced as a source of conflict. Many participants explained that their long-term exposure to diverse environments, both professionally and personally, has contributed to

reducing potential tensions regarding ethnicity or religion during the program. As one participant explained:

“[...] you now have also people of different ethnicities, different religions living together [...] after the war.[...] So we have workers that are sub Orthodox, we have beneficiaries that are Muslims, we have this kind of connection with them. So during our program, it wasn't difficult actually to include all of these because we already worked on that.”

This reflects strong diversity sensitivity practices already embedded in participants' contexts. By contrast, they mentioned difficulties related more to emotional exposure rather than cultural differences:

“I noticed that at some point, going deeper into emotional wounds, that was, for some people, too much.”

The interviews suggest that sharing personal experiences was often challenging. Certain topics triggered difficult memories, feelings of shame, or strong emotional responses. In some cases, a topic could trigger trauma and personal vulnerability that participants would not want to revisit. Therefore, risk management is primarily psychological and emotional, rather than intercultural. Nevertheless, the interviewees emphasize how the groups were, in fact, a safe space. In these groups, boundaries were respected:

“[...]at the beginning of every workshop [...] you always say, whenever you feel like you don't want to go on or you want to interrupt, just say it. It's not like something that [...] you must do. No, if you don't feel it, you don't feel it”

Being able to stop engaging at any time contributed to participants' comfort in joining group discussions. Some interviewees also explained that over time, people felt more confident about opening up about these difficult topics and emotions. This reinforces the key idea of a safe space to mitigate risks, as well as the role of adaptive facilitation in guiding participants through emotionally sensitive processes. Finally, across the interviews, inclusivity emerges as an intentional and structured principle of the program. Participants had to adapt to their group to make sure to include everyone, as illustrated by one interviewee:

"[...] one of the activities was to make a short film about abuse or internet bullying [...] through the cyber world project, and they really enjoyed it, you know, to being filmed because all of the youngsters are being filmed on Instagram. [...] and even the ones that are maybe a little bit shy, they have their own qualities, and they were, I don't know, making a text, you know, like, scripts for that movie or something like that. So everyone could do something[...]"

This demonstrates how participants tailored their projects to different group dynamics and individual abilities. It also indicates that risks of exclusion are mitigated by diverse strategies to respect this key idea of the Harmony Project.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the main challenges encountered were not related to ethnicity or religious diversity, but to emotional vulnerability and the sharing of personal experiences. However, the implementation of different strategies, such as respecting boundaries, fostering safe spaces, and promoting inclusive participation, effectively contributes to mitigating these risks.

5.5. Scalability and Transfer Conditions

In the analysis of scalability and transfer conditions, a distinction was made between a technical level and a content-related level.

It was described as particularly important to first analyze the local challenges, weigh them, and then align the Harmony Project, and especially the Ripple Projects, based on the needs and the most urgent challenges of the region. It is not about applying a fixed concept, but rather about adjusting the project depending on what is actually happening in the specific context. This shows that scalability is not understood as simple replication, but as adaptation to context. One interview partner explained:

"...to think about the local context [and] the challenges that the country itself is facing at that moment, to think about the aspects how to work on it and in which way to make it concise[...]. So it needs to address the beneficiaries'

needs and actually to take it into consideration before actually drafting all the workshops that we want [to do] inside that country.”

In addition, the interviews suggest that the Harmony Project depends on locally embedded relational networks, composed of NGOs and individuals who know the local challenges. The idea behind this is that the project should not just ‘happen’ in a place and then move on to another, but actually connect to existing structures and knowledge, and in that way become more effective and also more relevant for the people.

It also became clear that having different NGOs involved is not as important as how they are connected and how they communicate with each other. This includes understanding individual strengths and experiences, and how these complement each other. Moreover, communication should not only exist in theory, but should be used and maintained over time.

Another point that came up clearly is the need for one central person in the network, who holds everything together, brings in new impulses, connects people, and keeps things going over time. The emphasis on this central figure suggests that informal peacebuilding networks require active relational maintenance in order to remain functional over time. This implies that sustainability depends not only on institutional partnerships, but also on individuals capable of sustaining communication, coordination, and shared motivation across fragmented actors. Without such a role, there is a risk that the network becomes inactive or loses direction, as explained by one participant:

“But as well you need to have [...] a person that will be engaged in this network and that will actually carry all the process in between. So it's very important to have one person that's guided and that can do all the administration level process that is required in order to keep this network alive.”

A further aspect that was mentioned is the question of long-term stability of the network, especially in the context of the Balkans, where many people migrate to other countries. This creates a situation where networks can quickly lose members and connections, which can weaken continuity, institutional memory, and local leadership capacities.

Therefore, demographic instability and the fragility of local civil society networks must be taken into account. One interviewee reflected on this:

“Of course you have changes, [...], people leave, people enter, that's something that's very often happening in Bosnia Herzegovina because a lot of young people [are] moving to other countries, so you have this kind of [loss and disconnection].”

On a motivational level, openness was described as one of the most important requirements. This means being open to different life experiences, perspectives, and ways of thinking, especially in contexts where there might be tension, conflict, or trauma. Furthermore, participants from different professional backgrounds promoted diversity which created unique learning opportunities and shared understanding. One participant described this as:

“When it comes to Harmony Project, it's really crucial to somehow select people from different positions, I mean it wouldn't be great if all of them were teachers or journalists. So different professions, different categories of life because everyone has a different experience. And we all can learn from those different experiences.”

Additionally, there is a need for clarity about the vision of the Project. Otherwise, it becomes difficult to build a sense of community or shared direction. One interviewee explained:

“That first of all, it needs to be well explained. If you come to any country or any place, what is your project? Why is this important, why are you doing this? What is the purpose? [...and] just to have very clear clarity of what this project is about.”

Since the Harmony Project also deals with topics such as trauma and strong emotional experiences, it was described as necessary to be prepared for difficult emotions and to learn how to work with them instead of avoiding them. One participant reflected on this:

“You should know that by organizing this program how far you want to go [with these difficult emotions]. I think they're inevitable.”

It was also mentioned that leadership skills should be developed. This includes being able to guide groups, deal with complex situations, and bring people together in a constructive way. One participant described:

“Actually, what was the motivation of the people was that they were having the chance to show up as a leader in this type of work [...]. This work includes more attentiveness and then the opportunity for participants [to] grow their leadership skills.”

Finally, across all of these aspects, trust between participants was described as central. Creating a space where people feel safe, supported, and willing to open up is not easy, especially when people do not know each other or come from difficult contexts. One participant explained this feeling:

“I think that for everybody of us, it's a bit easier [to go to a shop] if you know where things are [...]. I didn't know anyone from the group, but I've met really great people[...].”

The repetition, throughout the interviews, of the importance of openness, trust, and preparedness for difficult emotions indicates that meaningful dialogue in post-conflict settings depends on environments where individuals feel psychologically secure enough to express vulnerability without fear of judgment or hostility. Nonetheless, interviewees also highlighted some limitations to the scalability of the Harmony Project such as the funding, as pointed out by one interviewee:

“Well risk in this sense NO - maybe limits like financial resources but in the context of like NGOs, administration, logistics, I think that we already have a very good network, So in this sense, I don't see any limits, just the financial resources.”

While the Harmony Project focuses deeply on addressing sensitive subjects related to trauma, stress, and division, the participants indicated that these were not the primary

challenges. It was rather logistical limitations that connected back to the ability to scale these projects to more of a larger audience:

“Think that that was for example the biggest problem for me because in my mind, when I worked with these high schoolers on cyber world project, I would say that it would be easier to work with them if I could afford to go, I don't know, on some mountain near the Sarajevo.”

Overall, the findings suggest that the scalability of the Harmony Project depends less on the replication of standardized activities and more on the successful reproduction of relational and organizational conditions that enable trust-building, emotional safety, and locally legitimate cooperation. Nevertheless, structural limitations, such as funding difficulties, migration, and the construction of a strong local network may constrain the scalability.

5.6. Long-Term Impact

One of the main outcomes that was described when talking about the long-term impact of the Harmony Project is the creation of an active network of NGOs and individuals who continue the work locally and support each other. One participant developed this idea:

“It can achieve a huge network of supporters, a huge network of professionals that can share their skills and they can pass their skills on to beneficiaries[...]. We can create a circle of different kinds of supporters[...].”

An important part of this network is also the use of local infrastructures such as NGOs, community centers, and schools. Schools were described as particularly interesting because they are stable, always present, and connected to different generations through students and families, as one participant explained:

“We should be doing [focusing more] on connection with the schools[...], because a school itself is something that never dies out[...]. NGOs or activists are facing [these risks], but schools are there”

Another idea that came up several times is to organize a conference at the end of a project cycle, where participants could come together, share results, connect, and think about next steps. One interviewee said:

“I think that also as a big impact would be to have a huge conference where you will have the presentation of the outcomes[...], invite ministries, NGOs, companies[...], because that is something [that creates sustainability].”

This is important to assure consistency and long term impact of the Harmony Project. Without a sustainable anchor and repeating get-together the danger would be to lose its long term change towards peace, as one interviewee pointed out:

“Otherwise it will be like another project[...] that doesn't have anything to follow up.”

A central aspect of long-term impact, especially in post-conflict contexts, is the ability to change people's mindsets. Moving away from mistrust and hostility toward more openness, trust, and a sense of shared responsibility. One participant reflected on this:

“Even if you change one mindset, it would be definitely the greatest thing.”

When change is witnessed on a personal level, it can begin to have a positive impact on people around that person and potentially carry on to other communities too. One participant described it like this:

“I see the change more bringing awareness [...] that this is possible [...] harmony with each other, with ourselves and nature.”

In summary, the interviews suggest that the long-term impact of the Harmony Project operates through a gradual multi-level process. Individual experiences of trust, emotional awareness, and interpersonal connection may initially appear limited in scale; however, participants described how these transformations can extend outward through professional networks, community initiatives, and institutional partnerships. In this sense, social impact does not emerge directly from isolated workshops, but through the cumulative diffusion of relational practices into broader community structures. This is the type of transformation needed to assist communities to heal in post-conflict settings.

6. Recommendations

According to the team's research findings, the following recommendations emerged for SANCHILD to scale the Harmony Project:

- *Shared Understanding:* The effectiveness of the Harmony Project lies in its ability to maintain a consistent core approach (5.2), while remaining responsive to different social contexts (5.3). The analysis suggests that this shared understanding contributed significantly to the coherence within BiH (5.1); however, it may risk inconsistent implementation and reduced continuity when it comes to scaling to different contexts. It is therefore recommended to clearly define the project's non-negotiable core principles while allowing flexibility in implementation across various contexts. This will preserve the project's core values while allowing implementation to remain dynamic and responsive to specific social contexts.
- *Trust-based Engagement:* The Harmony Project's impact depends on carefully facilitated, psychologically safe engagement environments that enable the future trainers to address highly sensitive and difficult experiences (5.5). Following this, they carry on this type of transformation into other communities through ripple projects. This process is emotionally complex and individualized (5.4), particularly in post-conflict settings where communities may not be receptive to approaches centered on peace and reconciliation. SANCHILD should therefore adopt a phased implementation approach when it comes to scaling beyond BiH; beginning with preliminary trust-building in trauma-sensitive contexts before progressing to deeper forms of engagement. This would help in establishing conditions necessary for meaningful participation while reducing the risk of superficial or ineffective implementation.
- *Local organizations and sustained networks:* The sustainability of Harmony Project depends on the involvement of local organizations and individuals who can lead and anchor the process within their communities (5.1; 5.5). The analysis also suggests that the project has fostered a strong and engaged network of participants and alumni, which contributes significantly to its ongoing Harmony Project impact (5.6).

SANCHILD should therefore both strengthen the capacity of local partners to deliver the project while actively maintaining and expanding its participant and alumni networks through structured follow-up, continued collaboration, and opportunities for long-term engagement beyond the formal project cycle.

- *Administrative and logistical framework:* The analysis suggests that the Harmony Project's administrative and logistical structures played a key role in enabling the local partners to effectively plan and implement their Ripple Projects (5.1). It further indicates that sustained staff engagement, coordination, and organizational support were essential in maintaining participant motivation and long-term involvement (5.3). SANCHILD should therefore prepare for increased structured coordination project management, facilitator support and regular communication channels to reduce fragmentation and strengthen long-term sustainability.

7. Conclusion

This research aimed to analyze the strengths and limitations of the Harmony Project and how these could be adapted to transfer the project to other countries, in the Balkans and beyond. Through a review of the literature, the Theory of Change was constructed, which guided the team throughout the research. The data collection consisted of five semi-structured interviews that were conducted with participants of the Harmony Project.

The findings reveal that the Harmony Project is an effective peacebuilding initiative based on local and community engagement. Participants display a strong engagement with this project because of, among other reasons, open-calls recruitment leading to personal motivations, and the immersive training environment. The project also focuses on emotional intelligence, mental health, and inner peace, supporting participants in their own recovery and healing, and empowering them to extend that to others. Expanding the Harmony Project would entail careful examination of each case, and adapting the framework to best suit each context while maintaining the project's core principles. This requires flexibility and a consistent focus on community needs. Otherwise, this risks losing the project's relevance and long-term effectiveness. Another challenge is the ability to navigate emotional vulnerability and openness to alleviate historical, ethnic and religious tensions. To mitigate these difficulties, strategies have been developed, such as inclusive practices, respect and awareness for boundaries, and developing empathic group environments. This relies on embedding the program within existing local NGO ecosystems, working collaboratively with individuals, and supporting partners through flexible, personal-centered approaches. The scalability of the project depends primarily on context-sensitive adaptation rather than simply replicating the model.

Nonetheless, risks and limitations must be considered. Expanding the program is constrained by the availability of funding for the Harmony Project and the Ripple Projects. The logistical resources and the number of trainers working with the organisation can also bring some difficulties to the expansion. Moreover, emotional engagement requires thoughtful facilitation and should be designed to ensure it resonates with each participant on a deeply personal and individual level. In addition, trust-building is inherently time-sensitive,

and pressures for results may undermine the process. Resource constraints, active conflict, and fragile local networks further affect the outcomes. While the program strengthens local connections, ongoing youth migration presents a broader contextual challenge for maintaining the network over time. Another factor to consider is the potential reliance on mental health support; however, the program's support network and ability to promote self-healing and long-term resilience remain core functions to enable sustainable well-being. It is also important to address its ability to connect with a variety of participants regardless of gender, race, religion, and other aspects rooted in identity in order to avoid limiting the program's reach to a single demographic group. These are essential factors to consider in ensuring that scaling remains context-sensitive, credible, and effective.

However, there is still the factor of the political climate that could affect the ability to scale the Harmony Project. NGOs are vulnerable to how different governments and institutions may accept their approach and assistance. This is essential to understand and to manage due to the fact that governments may view NGOs' involvement as counter to their understanding of peace and stability. On the other hand, a supportive political climate could boost NGOs' work to promote long-term progress at all levels. This is a dynamic relationship that, even in the present day, can shift, evolve, or dissolve at any moment. Despite this, at a time of increasing social fragmentation, the Harmony Project's approach is exactly the kind of inclusive and context-sensitive peacebuilding the world needs.

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Acknowledgement of AI

Following the Graduate Institute's academic integrity guidelines, AI tools (Grammarly) were used only to assist with proofreading, such as spelling, grammar, and punctuation. All research design, analysis, and substantive content were carried out by the researchers.

Annexe 1

Interview Questionnaire

(The follow up questions are meant as a backup in case the interviewed person struggles to understand our original question or doesn't answer in depth.)

Introduction

As you probably noticed beforehand, we are currently doing a research project for SANCHILD as part of our studies. We are four students, Aabha, Charlotte, Emily, and Nike, who study together International and Development Studies in our Master's program with the specialization Conflict, Peace, and Security in Geneva.

Part of our studies is the Applied Research Project (ARP). During this course, we work together with an international NGO or institution and support them with a research project. Our project with SANCHILD is to understand how the Harmony Project can be upscaled to other contexts by understanding its mechanisms and challenges. The first step is to upscale it to the Western Balkans, including Bulgaria and Albania, and in another step potentially worldwide.

The interviews we are currently doing are the first part of our research, because you, the active members and participants of the Harmony Project and Ripple Project, have first-hand knowledge and experience.

1. Entry and personal connection

To start, we would like to ask you to introduce yourself and your journey to the Harmony Project. How is the Harmony Project connected to your work and your life? With whom did you work particularly? How many projects did you implement and for how long did you work with the Harmony Project and/or the Ripple Projects ?

2. How the Harmony Project works and its methods

Looking at your experience with the Harmony Project, which methods or ways of working were particularly effective for you, and why? And when you compare it with other projects or trainings you know, what distinguishes the Harmony Project from others, what is the added value?

Follow-up:

What felt new or unfamiliar compared to other approaches?

Are there any aspects of your work that require higher levels of openness and trust
(depending on the groups they work with)

Which elements especially enabled trust or openness?

Was there anything you had not experienced in this way in other projects?

→ *Distinction from other approaches and contribution to positive effects*

3. Implementation and Ripple Projects

A central part of Harmony are the Ripple Projects, meaning the implementation in local groups. Could you describe your project concretely, and what worked well in the implementation ? [...] Following on that, what was challenging?

Follow-up:

What aspects or topics had the biggest positive or transformative impact on your community after the ripple projects implementations ?

How clear were the framework, expectations, and support?

How did participants participate in the implementation of the project?

What strengthened local ownership, and where were there uncertainties?

→ *Practical implementation, feasibility, local ownership, and conditions for sustainable impact*

4. Dealing with diversity, sensitivity, and difficult topics

Harmony works in contexts of ethnic diversity, historical tensions, and trauma. Where do you see particular challenges in these contexts, and what did you learn through the project about engaging with these issues in a responsible way?

Follow-up:

Were there situations that felt too intense or too sensitive?

What, in your view, requires clear boundaries or careful preparation?

What should definitely be considered when expanding the project?

→ *Risk awareness, sensitivity, contextual understanding, and practical learning*

5. Challenges and transfer to other countries

What strengths and limits did you experience during the Harmony Project and implementation? What do you think needs to be readjust looking back at the project now?

[...] If the Harmony Project were to be transferred to other countries, what elements, in your view, are fundamental (the core of the project that could be implemented elsewhere)? On the other hand, which elements should be adapted to the specific context?

Follow-up:

Which conditions need to be in place locally?

Where do you see real limits or risks?

What cannot simply be copied?

→ *Scalability, context dependency, and conditions for transfer*

6. Looking ahead and long-term impact

Looking ahead, what realistic long-term change could an expanded Harmony programme achieve, and how would one recognise that it has been successful?

Follow-up:

What would be a realistic success after several years?

What should not be promised, where are the limits of what is possible?

What might be less visible but still important?

→ *Long-term impact, managing expectations, and contribution to the Theory of Change*

Closing

Looking back now, what did you take away from it for your work within the Harmony and Ripple Projects and for your work and life in general?

From your perspective, is there anything important for the future of the Harmony Project that we have not yet addressed?

Annexe 2

Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form for Research Study

Title of Study: Together for Harmony in the Balkans and Beyond

Who are we?

We are a group of four Master's students from the Graduate Institute, Geneva, Switzerland. We are working in collaboration with the NGO, SANCHILD International, to analyse the Harmony Project in Bosnia and Herzegovina and assess how its community led peacebuilding approach might be adapted to other contexts in the Western Balkans and beyond.

What is our study about?

Our research aims to strengthen community-led approaches to peacebuilding in the Western Balkan region. Building on the experiences and outcomes of SANCHILD International's Harmony Project in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the study seeks to: analyse the project's strengths and challenges, identify lessons learned and areas for improvement, and explore how the project model could be adapted and scaled to other contexts, including Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, Bulgaria, and beyond.

Your perspectives and experiences are valuable in helping us better understand how such initiatives function in practice.

What will be involved in your participation?

Interview: If you agree to participate, we would like to invite you to a 30- to 60-minute semi-structured interview to discuss your experience with and perspectives on the Harmony Project.. With your consent, we will be video recording for the duration of the interview. Please be assured that these recordings will be treated with utmost confidentiality and privacy throughout our research. Any private information disclosed by

you will not be shared with anyone outside of this research group. These recordings will be destroyed once the research concludes.

Are there any risks or benefits to participating in this study?

- Participating in this study involves no known risks. However, as the interview will involve discussing personal experiences, it is possible that it may raise issues or uncomfortable feelings. You may choose to not answer any questions that make you feel that way.
- While you may not receive any direct benefit from participating in this study, your contribution may help improve community-led peacebuilding initiatives and inform future projects and policies in the Western Balkans and other regions.

Your rights

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. At any time, you have the rights to:

- Decline participation
- Withdraw at any time
- Discontinue the interview
- Refuse recording

There will be no negative consequences for exercising any of these rights.

Privacy protections and confidentiality

All information collected during this study will be kept confidential. Your name and any identifying details will be removed from transcripts and research outputs unless you consent otherwise. Data will be securely stored and accessed only by the research team.

Use of AI for Transcription

In this study, interview recordings may be transcribed using artificial intelligence (AI) tools. We recognize potential ethical and privacy concerns. To address these, identifiable information (such as names, locations, and times) will be removed or anonymized

wherever possible, and all data will be handled securely. Participation is voluntary: you may decline AI transcription at any moment.

If you have any questions or concerns about participating in this study, please contact us at arp2025.pathwaystopeace@graduateinstitute.ch.

Signature page

Title of Study: Together for Harmony in the Balkans and Beyond

Researchers: Aabha Shouche, Charlotte Vincent, Emily Copple and Nike Helmerich

– Geneva Graduate Institute

Partner Organisation: SANCHILD International

Faculty Lead: Professor Eric Degila

Statement of consent

By signing this form, I agree that:

- The study has been explained to me
- All my questions have been answered
- Possible harm and discomforts and possible benefits (if any) of this study have been explained to me
- I have been told that my personal information will be protected

In addition, I understand that:

- I have the right not to participate and the right to stop at any time
- I may refuse to participate without consequence
- I have a choice of not answering specific questions
- I am free now, and in the future, to ask any questions about the study
- No information that would directly identify me will be released or printed without my consent
- I will receive a signed copy of this consent form

_____	_____	_____
Name	Signature	Date

Please provide an email address below if you would like to be sent a transcription of your interview and/or a summary of the study results.

Email address: _____

Annexe 3

Theory of Change Concept Map

