

CRITICAL CHOICES

Assessing the Effects of Education and Civic Engagement on Somali Youths' Propensity Towards Violence

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Executive Summary

For far too long, evidence on “what works” has evaded practitioners working on violence reduction, particularly Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). While a vast literature exists on the drivers to violence and violent extremism, few rigorous evaluations have been done to figure out what works to prevent or reduce individuals from engaging in violence. Many existing strategies and programs are based on conventional wisdom or anecdotal information on what are perceived to be the drivers of violence. Among these, lack of equitable, quality education and political marginalization are often cited as drivers for youth joining violent groups. However to be able to effectively address the growing threat of political violence and violent extremism in fragile and conflict affected countries, empirical research testing the impact of programs meant to reduce violence is needed.

To respond to this evidence gap, Mercy Corps carried out a rigorous mixed-methods impact evaluation of a youth-focused stability program in Somaliland, funded by USAID, known as the Somali Youth Leaders Initiative (SYLI). The research tested the impact of increasing access to formal education and civic engagement opportunities on youth participation in and support for political violence. Both of these types of interventions are prominent priorities in the Somali National Strategy and Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism.

The research findings challenge some common assumptions. Although improving access to secondary education through this program reduced youth participation in political violence by 16%, it increased support for political violence by 11%. However, when combining secondary education with civic engagement opportunities that allow youth to carry out community action campaigns, both participation in and support for violence drop significantly, by 14% and 20% respectively.

Giving youth in schools the ability to participate in civic engagement activities alongside formal education, it seems, fulfills a common desire among youth—the desire to do something positive, meaningful and impactful. Addressing this need, our research indicates, is one way to steer youth away from a path towards violence. Creating a sense of empowerment for youth and giving them hope in the possibility of making a difference through nonviolent actions are pathways through which civic engagement activities can support stability-related outcomes.

As violence reduction, particularly CVE, is a key priority for many governments, the results from this study have potentially far reaching and significant policy implications. Our findings signal that education by itself does not fully address the underlying drivers of potentially destabilizing actions such as support for political violence. By increasing young people’s concern about future employment prospects and their dissatisfaction with government’s provision of education, schooling does not relieve youths’ frustrations; rather it can compound them. What matters to youth is not just having an opportunity to learn, but also being able to use their capabilities to achieve their ambitions and shape their future and the trajectories of their communities and nation.

Based on the results of this study, Mercy Corps is urging international donors, development agencies, and the Government of Somalia to:

1. Put political will and investment into the youth education and civic engagement pillars of the Somalia National Strategy and Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism.
2. Ensure that youth education programs with violence reduction goals work to simultaneously improve access to school, enhance the quality of education, and increase access to community or civic engagement opportunities.
3. Provide greater support to initiatives to improve the quality of education in Somaliland, and other transitional parts of Somalia.
4. Increase government investment, engagement, and visibility in development projects, particularly in education.