Youth as Agents of Positive Change

Recommendations for Advancing US efforts to Empower Youth and Foster Stability

When young people are able to actively participate in processes that affect their communities, they gain confidence and skills that can profoundly transform how they perceive themselves, their surroundings, and their options. Mercy Corps youth programs reach over 3 million young people in the toughest places, at the most critical time, with the right support so they can thrive, advance the well-being of their families, and help transform their communities and countries in positive ways.

The Challenge. Youth are a force for positive change — the generation that can help transition their countries into productive and secure nations. However, they are also the primary participants in conflict today and are increasingly concentrated in transitional and fragile environments. The reasons youth participate in conflict are multi-dimensional — they lack economic opportunities, political voice and a sense of belonging or connection to their communities.

From a practitioner's standpoint, we've observed that where many conflict prevention policies and conflict management efforts fall short is in the profile of the youth with whom they engage. Ironically, the tendency is to engage with the easiest to reach -- youth *less* engaged in violence, those in school and/or already engaged with their communities. In addition, developmental interventions often fail to adequately integrate approaches that simultaneously address the *root causes* of conflict, youth-specific drivers of conflict or legitimate youth-specific non-violent alternatives.

The Evidence. Mercy Corps has conducted multiple studies to better understand what makes youth prone to engage in or support political violence, and what program strategies show the greatest potential to mitigate this risk. The results of our research[1] challenge several core assumptions that underlie many youth programs in fragile and conflict-affected states, and have important implications for future youth programming and policies.

Most notably, we have found limited evidence that upholds the common view that youth *unemployment* is the primary cause of youth engaging in or being inclined towards violence or extremist causes. In many transitional contexts, an exclusive focus on youth employment and employability -- while leading to strong economic outcomes, which are extremely important in their own right – will not necessarily dissuade youth from engaging in violence or contribute significantly towards broader stability.

Our research also points to additional strategies that need to be incorporated into youth programs in order for them to address underlying drivers of violence among young people. Foremost among these are reducing corruption and inter-personal crime, elevating young people's status and respect in their communities, and ensuring youth have peaceful avenues to shape and influence changes in their societies.

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[1] http://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/youth-development

<u>Recommendations.</u> While moving in the right direction, prevailing US assistance programs have not yet harnessed youth's full potential for peace. To overcome this gap, we recommend that the US Government:

1. **Explicitly design and manage programs to contribute to stability where stability is a goal.** Our evidence cautions against assuming all youth development achievements will increase stability. For programs to have an impact on political violence, for example, they must be designed based on rigorous assessment as to why some youth in a particular context are more likely to support extremist groups and causes more than others. In Kenya, following the violence of the 2007 elections, USAID's "Yes Youth Can!" (YYC) program supported a range of leadership and entrepreneurial opportunities to provide non-violent avenues for civic engagement.

2. **Increase the number of multi-sector funding mechanisms in complex contexts.** The reasons youth engage in violence are diverse and multi-dimensional. Yet in too many cases donors and implementers operate under the assumption that single-input programs will improve youth outcomes and, by extension, stability. Successful youth programs, particularly in conflict-affected or chronically underdeveloped contexts, require a wide array of development and peacebuilding tools. Mercy Corps' USAID-funded Somali Youth Leaders Initiative was able to intentionally integrate education, employment, civic engagement, and psycho-social interventions towards a youth empowerment and community stabilization goal. This is a model that should be replicated.

3. **Address systemic drivers of conflict.** Our research also shows that it is often factors outside the control of youth themselves that most strongly predict their propensity towards violence. Combating corruption among government officials, improving personal safety of citizens, and addressing exclusion from political representation all stand out as critical leverage points for impacting stability. Programs that only target youth directly often exclude these underlying, systemic divers of violence.

4. **Increase support for adolescent programming (ages 12-19).** Recent Mercy Corps research[2] finds that the role of adolescents in conflict affected communities is especially important because they will be the first generation called upon to rebuild what was destroyed by violence. Meeting their psycho-social and unique developmental needs at this stage supports them in becoming agents for prosperity and stability. In Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, the U.S. State Department and UNICEF supported "Lost Generation" initiative works to improve life outcomes for boy and girl adolescents through school enrolment efforts, local mentorship, and gender-sensitive activities.

5. **Ensure that meaningful youth engagement is the rule, not the exception.** Unfortunately, assistance frameworks often make meaningful and iterative engagement with targeted communities difficult. Youth peacebuilding and empowerment programs must be designed and managed in active collaboration with youth, particularly those who are most marginalized, to achieve maximum impact. Youth-led conflict or market assessments and youth-led measurement and evaluation processes are best practices that should be institutionalized where appropriate

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[2] http://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/MercyCorps_SyrianAdolesenceAssessment_0614.pdf