Examining the Links between Youth Economic Opportunity, Civic Engagement, and Conflict:

Evidence from Mercy Corps' Somali Youth Leaders Initiative

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OVERVIEW

Somali youth hold the potential to contribute to positive change in their country. However, currently they are also the majority of the participants in militant and criminal groups.[1] To better understand the drivers of youth violence in Somaliland and Puntland, Mercy Corps Somalia examined the links between economic opportunity, civic engagement and conflict as part of its USAID-funded Somali Youth Leaders Initiative.[2]

The research led to a number of counter-intuitive findings, including: 1) youth who are involved in civic engagement initiatives are less likely to *endorse* political violence, but are more likely to have *engaged* in such violence; and 2) youth who felt they had more economic opportunities were at greater risk of engaging in and supporting political violence, though actual employment status did not relate to propensity towards political violence.

We also found that youth who experienced discrimination were more likely to engage in political violence, and that

youth with greater self-efficacy to influence decisions that affect them were more likely to endorse political violence. This briefing explores these findings and their implications for the Somali Youth Leaders Initiative, as well as for similar youth development programs working in fragile, conflict-affected environments.

Program Context

For 20 years, large parts of Somalia have been trapped in a downward spiral marked by violence, severe poverty, extremism, and criminal behavior. Consequently, stabilization has become the primary aim of nearly all major humanitarian and development donors operating in Somalia. Within this agenda, youth are a critical target population given the risks they pose to peace and prosperity if they continue to be economically and socially marginalized, and the potential they hold if sufficiently engaged and motivated.

To reverse these worrying trends and leverage the potential of youth to lead Somalia's development, Mercy Corps is investing in Somalia's large youth population through the USAID-funded Somali Youth Leaders Initiative (SYLI). Through this program, 150,000 young people in Somalia, Puntland, and Somaliland will have increased access to quality education, skills-training, and civic opportunities, leading to greater economic self-reliance and positive engagement with society.

Research Questions and Theories of Change

The underlying theory of change of the Somali Youth Leaders Initiative is that providing young people with quality education, skills needed to earn a decent wage, and opportunities to engage in public dialogue and civic actions will reduce the attraction of armed groups and criminal activity. This theory of change is illustrated in Figure 1 below. Many programs in conflict and post-conflict environments are based on similar premises. Yet results of recent studies that have examined these theories show mixed support for these claims[3]. Mercy Corps' own research has found that, in some contexts, young people's levels of civic engagement and perceived political voice can play a more influential role than employment opportunities in reducing their vulnerability to recruitment or exploitation by extremist groups[4].

Given the high stakes and considerable debate, it is critical to identify which factors best predict and reduce youth propensity towards violence in fragile contexts. At the same time, studies must seek to understand whether and how the underlying motivations for violence (i.e. financial incentives, status, or justice) affect the effectiveness of socio-economic and civic engagement interventions.

In this research, we examined two specific hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: If young people are civically engaged and feel they have constructive avenues for political participation, they will be less likely to become involved in or support the use of violence to promote political objectives.

Hypothesis 2: If young people have meaningful employment, they will be less likely to participate in or support political violence.

In addition to these theories, we examined the role of two potential mediating variables—respect and self-efficacy—to see how they affected participation in and support of political violence. In many societies, youth—particularly young men—use violence to garner the respect of others.[6] Research on violent extremism shows that this is especially prevalent when people feel humiliated.[7] Often development interventions try to help youth gain respect through productive means, such as community service and jobs. Additionally, many youth economic and
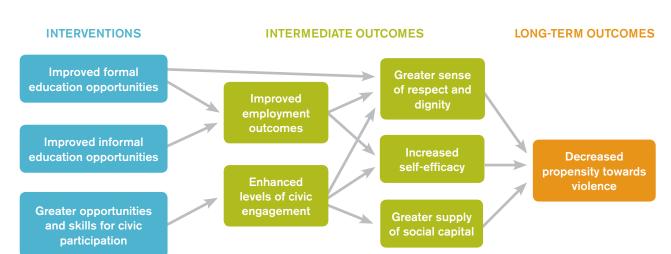
Figure 1: Theory of Change for Somali Youth Leaders Initiative[5]

civic engagement interventions aim to help youth control their own futures, based on the belief that young people's frustration over lack of control can drive them to violently protest and/or engage in conflict.[8]

We tested the following theories of change to see if these intermediate outcomes of the SYLI program—increased respect and self-efficacy—help explain the relationship between civic and economic engagement and violence:

Hypothesis 3: If young people feel respected, they will be less likely to participate in or support political violence.

Hypothesis 4: If young people feel they have control over their own futures (i.e., self-efficacy), they will be less likely to participate in or support political violence.

Methodology

The study aimed to fill a gap in the quantitative evidence on research on youth employment, civic engagement, and violence. To do this, the study used household survey data and employed multivariate regression to identify the factors that significantly predict youth's attitudes and behaviors towards political violence. The data analyzed were from individual surveys of a representative sample of 1,089 youth (549 in-school and 540 out-of-school youth) in Somaliland and Puntland. The survey was conducted by the Mercy Corps Somalia team between February 29 and April 18, 2012 as part of the SYLI baseline study.

The analysis of the cross-sectional data used in this study has limitations. Though significant relationships between factors were found, the direction of the relationship is unknown. Furthermore, unmeasured factors may influence or explain the relationships found.

KEY FINDINGS

1) **Engagement and Attitudes about Violence:** Though the majority of youth in Somaliland and Puntland do not support violence, over 20 percent have either participated in violence or would do so given the opportunity. This indicates that a sizeable portion of the population is at risk for engaging with violent movements. The result did not differ by gender, or by whether youth were enrolled in school. However, youth in school were more likely to support the use of violence. While education can sometimes support peace, in many contexts, schools teach youth belligerent views, which can harden stereotypes and inflame tensions. Therefore, without a concerted effort to teach tolerance and respect, it is unclear whether expanding access to education opportunities will improve stability.

2) **Civic Engagement:** Youth who were civically engaged were less likely to endorse the use of violence to achieve political means, supporting the hypothesis. However, youth who were civically engaged were also more likely to have engaged in political violence. Two potential explanations for these seemingly contradictory findings are: (1) youth who are involved civically understand the consequences of using violence, but may get frustrated and succumb to impulses;[9] or (2) youth who have participated in violence decide to become civically engaged to find another way to create change. These findings point to the likelihood that in the Somalia context, a clear line doesn't exist between peaceful and violent forms of political activism. As such, youth may resort to both forms to bring about changes in their societies.

3) **Economic Engagement:** Employment status was not found to be related to youth engagement in or attitudes about political violence. The lack of a relationship between employment and violence is not surprising given the mixed evidence from other studies, and the fact that economic incentives appear to rarely drive youth in Somaliland and Puntland towards violence. Unexpectedly though, youth who feel they had greater economic prospects were more

likely to have engaged in and expressed support for political violence. A similar finding has emerged in Pakistan; middle class urban dwellers were more likely to support militant groups than the poor because the poor are more likely to suffer from the actions of militants.[10]

Additionally, while out-of-school youth who receive skills training show a lower propensity to engage in violence, they were also found to be more likely to believe that violence is justified in some cases. One of the risks of many skills training programs is that they raise expectations that are not easily met given the lack of economic opportunities. Also, trained youth often report feeling that discrimination or other barriers prevent them from accessing existing economic opportunities. As a result, youth may become frustrated in their inability to leverage employment opportunities, putting them at higher risk of seeing violence as justified.

4) **Respect:** Youth who experienced discrimination—either in access to economic opportunities, receiving basic services, and/or community meetings—were more likely to engage in political violence. This is consistent with research demonstrating that feeling humiliated and excluded are factors that lead young people to join or support extremism movements or violent groups.

5) **Self-efficacy:** Youth with greater self-efficacy – as defined by their perceived abilities to influence decisions in their family, community, and country – were more likely to endorse the use of political violence. One potential explanation for this finding is that much of Somalia is a society where most change occurs through violence, and few role models espouse non-violent change. So when youth feel capable of bringing about change, they may believe the best way is through violence.

Figure 2: Logistic regression analysis of predictors of behaviors toward political violence

Variable	Have used force or violence for a political cause			
	β	S. E.	Wald	Odds Ratio
Perceive more problems with schools	-0.014 *	0.006	4.907	0.986
Positive view of community education committees	-0.005	0.003	2.445	0.995
Optimistic about economic prospects	0.026 ***	0.005	22.814	1.027
Greater self-efficacy	0.009	0.005	3.754	1.009
Greater civic engagement	0.009 *	0.004	4.072	1.009
Greater perceived voice	-0.005	0.004	2.153	0.995
Experienced discrimination	0.014 ***	0.004	15.695	1.014
Constant	-3.017 ***	0.635	22.599	0.049
R^2 (Nagelkerke)	0.257			
R^2 (Cox & Snell)	0.164			
-2 Log Likelihood	443.439			

*$p<.05$, **$p<.01$, ***$p<.001$

Figure 3: Logistic regression analysis of predictors of attitudes toward political violence

Variable	Believe that violence is sometimes necessary for a just cause			
	β	S. E.	Wald	Odds Ratio
Perceive more problems with schools	- 0.008	0.006	1.455	0.992
Positive view of community education committees	- 0.002	0.003	0.369	0.998
Optimistic about economic prospects	0.024 ***	0.005	19.683	1.024
Greater self-efficacy	0.01 *	0.004	5.94	1.01
Greater civic engagement	0.008 *	0.004	4.178	0.992
Greater perceived voice	- 0.013 ***	0.004	12.152	0.987
Experienced discrimination	0.002	0.004	0.211	1.002
Constant	- 0.961	0.596	2.598	0.383
R^2 **(Nagelkerke)**	0.16			
R^2 **(Cox & Snell)**	0.055			
-2 Log Likelihood	194.722			

$*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001$

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Mercy Corps Somalia's research provides insight for both the implementation of its SYLI program and for other policies and programs aimed at mitigating the factors that drive youth participation in and endorsement of political violence.

Implications for the SYLI program:

• Increased civic engagement and employment opportunities are not likely to be enough to promote stabilization. Based on the findings related to these factors, as well as around self-efficacy, youth need to learn how to create change through non-violent means. In program trainings and other youth activities, SYLI will make efforts to engage with and discuss role models and examples from Somalia, Somaliland and Puntland. Mercy Corps' conflict management programs in other countries have had success using this approach.

• The research indicates that when youth feel frustrated, they begin to see violence as justified. Youth who live in conflict and crisis-prone environments often do not learn productive coping and self-control behaviors. The SYLI team is actively incorporating these life skills into its support to non-formal and formal education systems, which could exponentially increase the impact of other SYLI educational interventions on youth's attitudes and behaviors toward violence.

• The SYLI team is examining whether there are ways to work with the education ministries in the three geographic regions to reduce perceived discrimination of students.

• The SYLI program is redoubling its efforts to ensure the technical and vocational trainings are meeting actual market demands for specific job skills. Market demand for skills is a prerequisite for promoting real opportunities for youth for employment and self-employment.

Recommendations for the larger youth development community:

- This research provides further evidence that the connection between youth employment and participation in political violence is not straightforward. In similar research in Kenya, Mercy Corps did find a relationship that positively linked employment to lower the likelihood of participation in political violence. However, in Kenya, politicians used financial incentives to motivate youth to engage in violence. In Somalia, economic benefits do not appear to be the primary motivation for violent behavior. These differences reinforce the need to understand why youth participate in violence when designing programs to promote stabilization.

- The relationship between perceived discrimination and participation in and endorsement of political violence was quite strong, illustrating how these hurtful experiences often drive youth to engage in violence. Possible reasons for violence could include youth wanting to protect themselves and to feel as though they are treated fairly. Therefore, interventions need to provide youth opportunities to gain respect, such as meaningful employment and community service. At the same time, projects should work to reduce real and perceived discrimination, by ensuring that teachers represent the diversity of the student body, and provide equal opportunities to students from different groups.

- Increasing opportunities for civic and socio-economic engagement is not enough to reduce participation in or endorsement of political violence. In many cases, when youth are most hopeless is when things are stable, because they do not believe things can change. People act when they feel there is hope for a different life.[12] Youth development programs must make sure that when youth feel they can act to make change, we support them to make wise choices. This requires imparting knowledge and skills for how to use constructive, peaceful avenues to influence changes in their communities and broader societies. Our findings clearly illustrate that increasing young people's voice and agency is not enough, and that such efforts need to engender peaceful methods for creating change.

1   According to the 2012 Somalia Human Development Report, youth are the majority of the participants in militant and criminal groups in Somalia, including al-Shabaab.

2   This research was funded from the same USAID cooperative agreement, along with core resources from Mercy Corps.

3   Beber, B & Blattman, C. (2010). The Industrial Organization of Rebellion: The Logic of Forced Labor and Child Soldiering. Berman, Felter, & Shapiro (2010) Do Working Men Rebel? Insurgency and Unemployment in Iraq and the Philippines. NBER Working Paper. ; Humphreys, Macartan & Jeremy Weinstein, Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War, American Journal of Political Science, Vol. 52, No. 2, April 2008, p.447. http://www.stanford.edu/~jweinst/files/AJPS_2008.pdf

4   Mercy Corps, (2011). Examining the Youth, Economic Engagement and Conflict Nexus: How Youth Economic Empowerment Programming Can Enhance Stability. Paper presented at USAID Global Education Workshop, Aug 2011, Washington, DC.

5   In this study, no analysis was done on the role of social capital due to the lack of sufficient data on attitudes and behaviors related to this factor.

6   The latest World Development Report on jobs lists the status that youth develop as a result of their job as an important outcome from employment.

7   USAID (2009) Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism

8   Lettie B., Myburgh, C. & Poggenpoel, M. (2010) The relationship between the perception of own locus of control and aggression of adolescent boys. South African Journal of Education. V. 30:511-526; Moser , C. & van Bronkhorst, B (1999). Youth Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean: Costs, Causes, and Interventions. World Bank.

9   Much social psychological and public health research demonstrates that attitudes often do not predict behavior. Youth, and youth who grow up during a crisis in particular, have challenges with impulse control (Lundberg, Mattias and Alice Wuermli (eds). 2012. Children and Youth in Crisis: Protecting and Promoting Human Development in Times of Economic Shocks. Washington DC: The World Bank.)

10   Blair, G. , Fair, C.C. Malhotra, N. & Shapiro J., (2012)"Poverty and Support for Militant Politics: Evidence from Pakistan," American Journal of Political Science.

11   Kurtz, J. (2011) Understanding Political Violence among Youth: Evidence from Kenya on the links between youth economic independence, social integration, and stability. Mercy Corps, Washington, DC.

12   This explanation is based on the rich learned helplessness literature, which illustrates when people are willing to try to change outcomes and/or their lives. Maier, S, Peterson, C. & Schwartz, B. (2000) From helplessness to hope: The seminal career of Martin Seligman. In J. Gillham (Ed.). The Science of Optimism and Hope (pp. 11-37). Radnor, PA: Templeton Foundation Press.

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