



S.Sheridan/Mercy Corps

PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS

Mercy Corps' Approach to Partnering with Young People

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Introduction

The world today is young. The median ages in the countries where Mercy Corps works tell an important story: Niger, 15 years; Mali, 16 years; Gaza, 18 years; Guatemala, 21 years; and Ethiopia, 17.6 years. Dozens of other countries are experiencing similar demographic trends. Partnering with these young people to cope during crisis, adapt to adversity and drive forward development is our organization's call to action. Through acting to support young people we advance our mission to alleviate suffering, poverty and oppression by helping people build secure, productive and just communities. In order to do this, we must engage adolescents and youth, referred to collectively as young people, who often make up the majority of those living in the communities where we work. Our goal is to work with young people ages 10–24 so that they are "future-proof," meaning they are ready for what comes their way, can confront the obstacles of adolescence with resiliency and resolve and demonstrate their value to their families, communities and society. By working with local civil society partners, private sector partners and local governments, we can demonstrate that young people are an opportunity for transformation rather than an inevitable liability. They are, in large part, why we believe a better world is possible.



future-proof

verb.

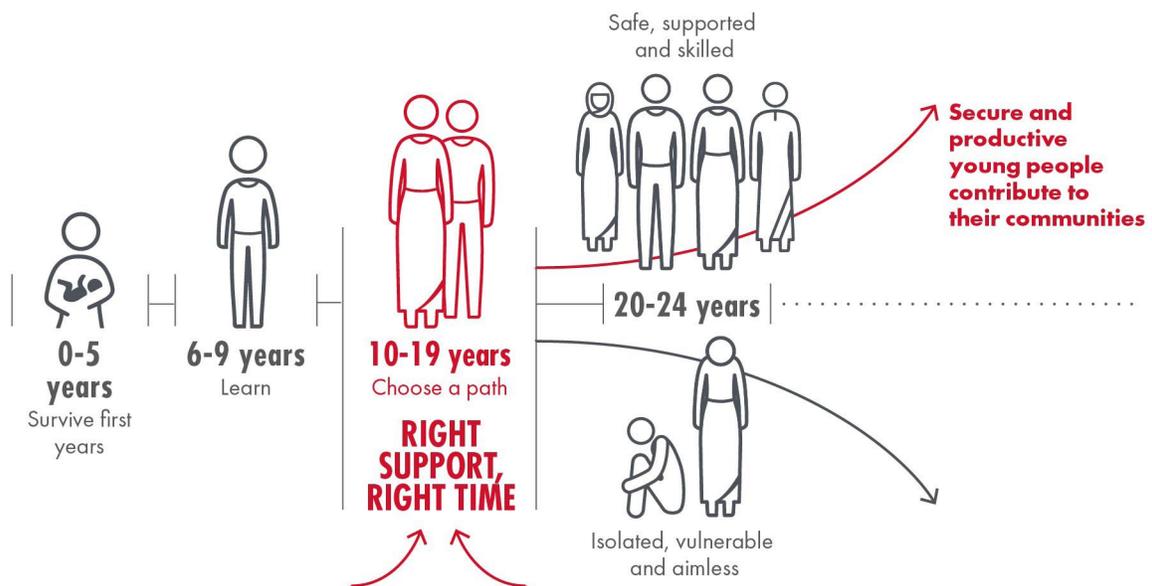
To make capable of adapting to and overcoming unforeseen challenges and obstacles; resilient and adaptable to change.

This document outlines Mercy Corps' approach to working with young people. First, we discuss the rationale, our theory of change and our agency's distinctive: Adolescents. Next, we delineate the core elements of our approach: advancing well-being, education, employability and civic engagement.

Invest in Young People as the Leaders of Today

Today, our world is younger than ever before. Nearly 1.8 billion young people between the ages of 10 and 24 are making their way in this world. They are brimming with hope, using innovative technologies, grappling with constantly evolving challenges and charting the way forward. The vast majority—nine out of 10—live in less developed countries where they are confronted with unprecedented social, economic and cultural shifts, and challenges that impede their ability to contribute to growth and stability. Young people confront these shifts and challenges at a time when their own psychological and physical development is undergoing rapid change. They demand and deserve our engagement – and the engagement of their peers, parents and leaders – as partners for change, enabling them to access existing opportunities or create new ones where few exist. The choices that young people make today and in the future – influenced by the people and events around them – will contribute to the possibility for peace, stability and progress in the world's most fragile places. We choose to be their partners in making that possibility a reality.

PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS SECURE AND PRODUCTIVE YOUNG PEOPLE



At Mercy Corps, we believe that young people who live in these crisis-prone societies can be transformative change agents rather than demographic liabilities. And yet they are often overlooked when it comes to funding and services. Far too often, youth are thought of as passive recipients of support rather than influential stakeholders worthy of engaging in the community development process. Within this demographic, we focus heavily on adolescents (10–19), who are coming of age in places where life is in a constant state of disruption and insecurity. Decisions they make now can set the course for society to thrive or decline socially, politically and economically.

Since 2010, we've worked with 3.5 million young people across 33 countries. Prioritizing investments in adolescents and youth will drive recovery and development, decrease fragility and break cycles of violence. Young people are not only our future leaders, **they are the leaders of today.**

OUR THEORY OF CHANGE
When young people feel safe and supported they will be able to learn relevant knowledge and skills, and engage civically, peacefully and economically, enabling them to lead secure and productive lives.



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Our Distinctive: Adolescents

Transitions

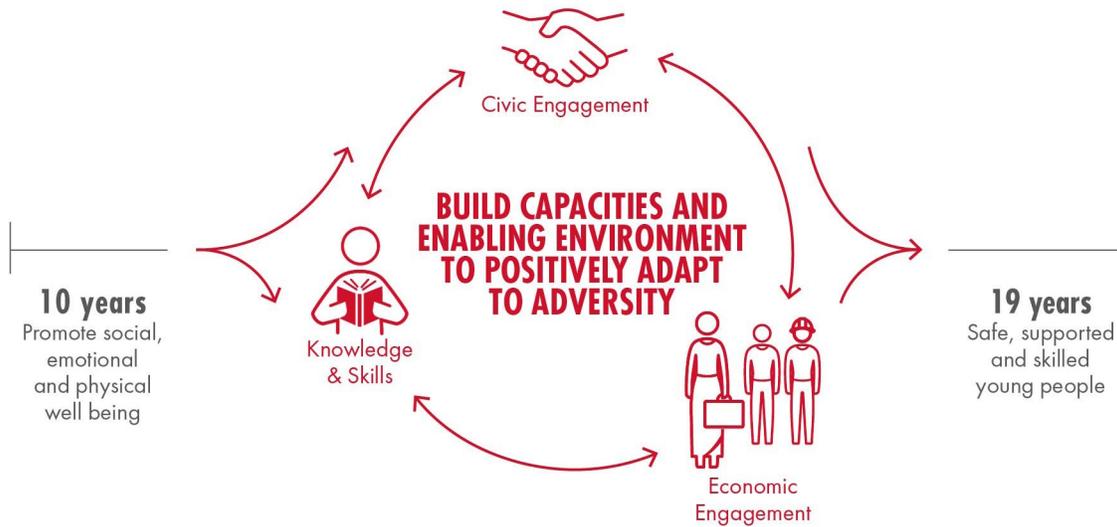
Mercy Corps focuses on ADOLESCENTS because the decade of development from 10–19 years is often filled with key life transitions such as sexual initiation, secondary school completion, economic activity, and in many cases, marriage and parenting. And because adolescents' brains are still developing, full of creative potential, and norms and behaviors haven't yet been set. The ability of adolescents to navigate a productive, hopeful path is dependent on their ability to build strategies to overcome the inevitable challenges they face. Investing in adolescents and equipping them with the skills needed to make better choices, cope with and respond positively to situations of profound stress, and embark on challenges non-violently, builds their resilience and helps build communities that are more resilient to potentially derailing events.

Differentiation

Adolescents and youth are often seen as a homogenous group, which results in programming that is not appropriately targeted or that misses entire segments of the youth population (often younger adolescents, working adolescent boys and girls in particular). Further overlooking adolescents, national government policies frequently favor infants and children with services such as immunizations and enrollment in primary school; neglecting adolescent enrollment and retention in secondary school.

PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS

ADVANCING ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT



Mercy Corps strives to understand the different roles, responsibilities and needs of boys and girls. Adolescence is especially risky for girls in developing countries. Compared to boys, they are more likely to drop out of school, experience poorer health outcomes, be socially isolated and have fewer economic opportunities. They are also vulnerable to child marriage, sexual assault and early pregnancy,¹ with pregnancy and childbirth being a leading cause of death among adolescent girls; the first being suicide among older adolescents. The challenges are daunting, but investing in girls has high dividends. A girl who finishes secondary school is less vulnerable to early marriage, pregnancy and sexual- and gender-based violence; she is more likely to access health care and earn an income. For every secondary school year completed, a girl’s income can increase by 15 to 25 percent.² Equally hard to reach are adolescent boys and girls that are engaged in the informal labor market, often under harsh conditions. These adolescent boys and girls do not have the time or support networks that enable access to programming and services.

Intentionally reaching and engaging adolescent girls and boys can build the assets and protective networks they need to avoid life’s trap doors (early marriage and pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, dropping out of school, drug abuse and engaging in violence). Falling through one trap door often leads to others, whereas if we invest early enough, we can help adolescents avoid these trap doors or recover and become more resilient by developing the ability to adapt to present and future demands.

Another critical window of time to reach young people is immediately following adolescence. During this period young people continue to make critical choices that influence their ability to engage economically and civically, start equitable relationships and families, and reduce their exposure to or participation in violence. Mercy Corps supports youth between 20 and 24 who may need opportunities to develop skills, generate income, broaden social networks and experience a greater sense of safety and belonging.³

1 <https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/sites/gem-report/files/girls-factsheet-en.pdf>

2 <https://social.un.org/youthyear/docs/fact-sheet-girl-youngwomen.pdf>

3 USAID Policy Youth in Development: Realizing the Demographic Opportunity. October, 2012. http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1870/Youth_in_Development_Policy_0.pdf

This age demographic requires a specialized approach and it is imperative that we tailor our programming to reach them effectively. Effectively differentiating our approach requires the collection and analysis of age- and sex-specific data, guided by tools like [Who Knows? to Knowing Who! Collecting Age- and Sex- Specific Data](#).

Our Approach

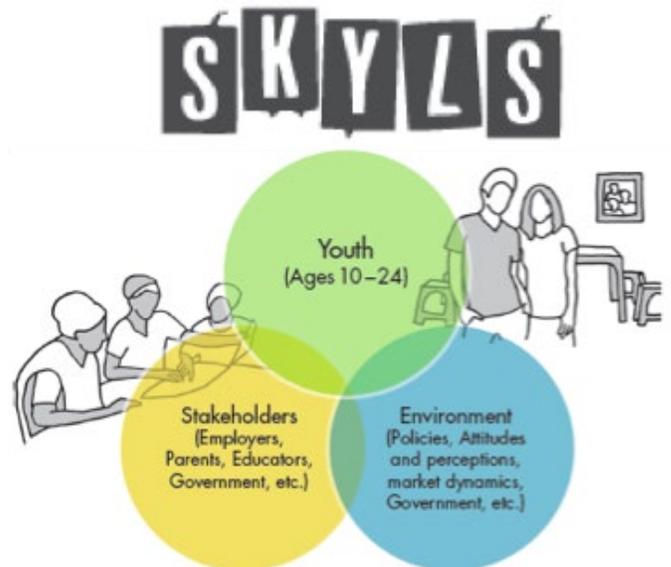
Our approach is comprised of a **core principle** that connects adolescents to our mission, our strategies, our partnerships and our interventions; **a suite of integrated programming priorities** responsive to adolescent priorities and challenges; and an **adaptive process**. This trio ensures we are constantly thinking, designing and responding to adolescents and their evolving contexts, needs and opportunities.

First, we co-design with young people to be real partners in change

Adolescents have long been a neglected, underserved and misunderstood population. Displacement and conflict only increase their risk, invisibility and isolation. The result is that most aid programs are blind to the barriers adolescents face, and in some cases, unknowingly exacerbate vulnerability into exploitation, abuse or violence. Moreover, little access to vital services further erodes their mental and physical health, severely limits the areas where they feel safe, and has a negative impact on their development.

Mercy Corps places adolescents in the front—as leaders—to be partners in the change they want to see. This is our core principle. **We design with them**, not for them. Young people know what will work for them and what won't. Talking with youth about their priorities, fears, daily commitments and safe and unsafe places in the community helps shape the design of any service or activity. We also know that adolescents and youth value mentorship in the form of peers, role models and adults who can help them expand their horizon of what is possible and how to get there.

We are intentional about finding, reaching and engaging adolescents. We account for sex- and age-specific vulnerabilities, needs and capacities and co-design program activities accordingly. We use mapping and mobile data tools, like the Girl Roster™ and Boy Matrix within the [I'm Here Approach](#), to understand the demographic of young people in a particular community; available services in that area and the challenges they face. If we don't have a clear picture on exactly who is in the community, we won't reach them. We explore the barriers they face and the transitions they are going through because they differ according to factors like age and sex. The emotional, social, educational and economic needs and opportunities of a 24 year old are very different from a 14 year old. A catch-all "youth" program of 10–24 year olds won't have the intended impact unless we tailor activities to specific sex and age segments—and only then with the guidance and input from the youth themselves, using tools like [Skills and Knowledge for Youth Leaders \(SKYLS\)](#) or [Building Girls' Protective Assets](#)™.⁴



⁴ Building Girls' Protective Assets, Population Council, 2016.

Well-being leverages impact in educational, economic and civic engagement.



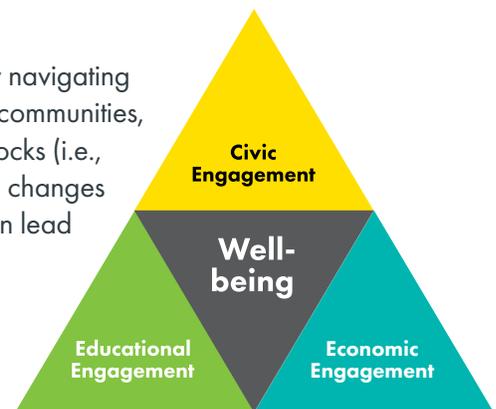
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Second, we see the big picture and support integrated programs

Daily life for a young person is a rich and complicated experience that intersects sectors, issues, challenges and solutions. This demands an integrated approach that addresses the complexity of their emotional, physical, educational, social and economic needs. An adolescent's path to adulthood is not linear with smooth, predictable transitions between milestones. Particularly in fragile environments, there are barriers, obstacles and setbacks. Investing in the well-being of adolescents and youth living in complex environments multiplies the power of education, civic and community action, and economic engagement.

Well-being: Feeling safe, hopeful and supported is critical to successfully navigating adolescence. Adolescents, particularly those living in fragile and insecure communities, are under profound stress⁵ at a critical time in their lives. Facing multiple shocks (i.e., violence, displacement, neglect) over an extended period of time results in changes in adolescents' brain chemistry that inhibit their ability to assess risk and can lead them to detach from themselves, their families, and communities.

Mercy Corps helps adolescents reconnect with themselves, their families and communities; to regain a sense of personal safety; to establish healthy relationships; to build empathy; to develop critical thinking skills; to set short and long-term goals; and to engage in civic action projects that promote social cohesion and non-violence. It builds awareness around gender equity and power, and protective assets and measures. This kind of holistic, psychosocial well-being programming is not just 'nice to have,' it can be truly life saving by curtailing destructive behaviors stemming from profound stress.



Once able to meet basic needs through positive coping skills, adolescents are better able to absorb new information, knowledge and skills. Integrated into our approach is programming that educates young people on how their brain chemistry is affected during periods of prolonged stress, and how they can be proactive to get back on the path of positive development. Without being responsive to the impact stress has on cognitive and social functioning we risk falling short both in terms of programmatic impact, and the return on the investment of limited resources. In addition to rigorous internal evaluations, forthcoming research with Yale University examines the impact of this approach and measures changes in stress over time among Syrian and Jordanian adolescents participating in our [Advancing Adolescents](#) program in Jordan.

5 Profound Stress is defined as the prolonged, and at times overwhelming, threat to the physical or psychological wholeness of the person. This is also often referred to as Toxic Stress or Chronic Stress.

Engagement: There is tremendous benefit and opportunity when young people engage with their communities, understand their potential influence in the public sphere and are equipped with the skills and resources needed to earn a living. When young people are able to contribute to their communities and participate in decisions that affect their lives, not only do they gain confidence and status, and strengthen their relationships with peers and adults, but communities ultimately benefit from their bold ideas and openness to change. Community participation also helps young people gain agency and purpose—in some cases it enables them to participate in righting an injustice or protecting communities that have suffered in the past.⁶ Around the world, Mercy Corps works with young people to contribute to solutions by expanding their engagement and influence with local actors, building broader community demand for their participation, and facilitating their active engagement in the design, implementation and evaluation of programs.

Education (non-formal): Knowledge and skills are critical to enabling young people to navigate a healthy, productive and safe present and future. Currently, of the 263 million children, adolescents and youth out-of-school in the world, 77 percent are either adolescents not in lower secondary school (60 million) or upper secondary school (142 million). Many adolescents living in poverty and youth in low income countries have never been to school and others that have dropped out are expected never to return.⁷

An alternative and innovative approach to supporting out-of-school adolescents and youth to learn relevant knowledge and skills through non-formal education (see box below) is desperately needed. At Mercy Corps, we emphasize providing high quality and recognized non-formal education for out-of-school adolescents and youth. This often includes critical transferable skills that can be applied across a variety of settings including employment, entrepreneurship and civic engagement.⁸ Layering onto these transferable skills we work with local partners to teach demand-driven vocational training to support young people generating income. For those interested in returning to formal school, we support their re-entry into the formal system.

Non-formal Education happens outside the traditional classroom in after-school programs, community-based organizations or at home. Curriculum can cover basic education modules, life skills and vocational training. It may be led by a qualified teacher, leader with relevant skills, or trained volunteer. It usually does not lead to a formal degree or certificate, but could be accredited if curriculum has been approved.



S.Agha/Mercy Corps

Knowledge of and access to social and health services is another area of great influence on young people's development. For girls, access to sexual and reproductive health services and information is key. Many adolescent girls are poor, have little control over household resources, little knowledge about sexual and reproductive health issues, lack the ability to make their own decisions about their health and have no access to services that meets their specific needs. This is why Mercy Corps connects adolescent girls with trusted and safe partners that provide services and information to build girls' health assets.

6 World Bank, Development and the Next Generation, World Development Report, 2007.

7 Global Education Monitoring Report. Education for People and Planet: Creating Sustainable Futures for All, 2016. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002457/245752e.pdf>

8 Transferable skills are taught using the Transferable Skills Curriculum.

Economic engagement: Employment, entrepreneurship and other income-generating opportunities often provide more than economic benefits—they provide youth with a purpose and a sense of status and belonging. At the same time, many young adolescents are forced to earn an income at an early age because of their families’ dire economic reality. Mercy Corps advocates for protection against child labor and exploitative conditions, while also creating avenues for older adolescents to gain skills and transition safely to decent and equitable work opportunities. Mercy Corps specifically promotes work that is productive, equitable and stable (where possible). We also emphasize safe work for adolescents and youth. This is particularly important for adolescent girls and young women, and may include safety initiatives tied to transportation and restrooms, and the inclusion of female mentors and staff in the workplace. For more guidance, please see [Guidance on Safe and Decent Work for Adolescents and Youth](#).

Employment programming for adolescents and youth is often most effective when layered with other holistic interventions such as mentoring and transferable skills.



M.Jama/Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps’ economic empowerment programs are demand-driven. We conduct market analyses to assess the changing needs of the private sector and other potential employees to ensure that the skills youth are developing will match the needs of local economies. Youth-led labor market analyses allow young people to cultivate relationships with potential employers while simultaneously gaining a firsthand view of the needs of their local labor market. As many young people have limited social capital and professional networks, Mercy Corps also facilitates links with local businesses and potential employers. Mercy Corps’ [Youth Employment Cheat Sheet](#) highlights our successes and best practices in economic programming for youth and our [World of Work](#) document provides an overview of Mercy Corps’ approach to employment programming.

Employment programming for adolescents and youth is often most effective when layered with other holistic interventions such as mentoring and transferable skills. We also understand that well-being is critical to young people’s success securing and maintaining work. Finally, Mercy Corps seeks to strengthen the enabling environment for youth economic engagement. We influence informal norms such as perspectives of young people as employees and economic actors as well as formal rules such as age requirements for financial services, registering a business, etc.

Third: We manage for change and scale

Mercy Corps, like young people, operates in a fluid and ever-changing environment and we are required to adapt our behavior, systems and interventions to best achieve the changes we aim to see. While real-time and big data are difficult to come by in many of the places we work, we strive to capture data often, disaggregated by age and sex to differentiate our impact and approach, and build learning into our programs. We must do

this quickly and regularly. Adaptive management provides the enabling environment that encourages the design of more flexible programs, promotes intentional learning, minimizes the barriers to modifying and adapting theories of change and interventions, and creates incentives for learning and managing adaptively. We use a range of processes and sources—monitoring data, research findings, adolescent and caregiver feedback and observations, trip reports, data analyses and lessons from on-going implementation—to regularly review and make any alterations or adaptations. We value young people’s voice and input into this process; their insights are different than ours and therefore expand the realm of interpretations and solutions.

These quick and frequent quality checks must be balanced out by more rigorous evaluations that can attribute change to activities we and our partners design and implement. Exploring opportunities for evaluation partnerships, like our work on profound stress and attunement with Yale University and the impact of stress on cognition with Harvard University in Jordan, allow us to advance research and practice, while sharing what we find with young people, leaders in their communities, countries and our donors and peers.



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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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