

"After the violence, I realized life had changed; it felt like this is not our country like we are refugees in our own country."

Peter G.,
young man from
Eldoret District, Kenya



Hussein Abdille / Mercy Corps, 2008

Over 70% of the perpetrators of the 2007/8 post-election violence in Kenya were youth.^{vi} Yet only 5% of Kenyan youth engaged in the violence. This highlights the reality that while youth often play major roles in violent conflict, it is typically only a small fraction of the youth population who become involved.

Understanding Political Violence Among Youth:

Evidence from Kenya on the links between youth, economic independence, social integration, and stabilityⁱ

Background

Widespread violence erupted in Kenya following the disputed presidential election in December 2007. Incited and abetted by politicians and local leaders, gangs of armed Kalenjin and Kikuyu youth engaged in looting, rioting, and killing in parts of the Rift Valley. Samuel M. was among the youth who joined in the fighting. He recalls:

[W]hen they announced Kibaki had won, we heard cries from everywhere. I thought they [Kibaki supporters] had been attacked because that day there was tension everywhere... We gathered outside and said we will defend ourselves, we heard that the Kalenjins are coming to fight us! So we went back to our homes but we had already bought pangas (machete).ⁱⁱ

Another youth, Peter G. faced similar threats during the violence. His family's business was destroyed and he watched as his uncle was murdered by a group of youth. But he did not resort to violence, despite pressure by his peers to retaliate. He explained:

I felt that this violence was not supposed to occur. I felt bitter seeing people hurting each other. It showed me that some people are not humane... What I saw there made me speechless and numb; I didn't know what to do.ⁱⁱⁱ

Like Peter G., the vast majority of youth in Kenya did not get involved in the violence.^{iv} However, the small number of youth that did had a disproportionately high impact on the stability of their communities and country. The post election violence resulted in the death of 1,500 people, the displacement of 660,000 others, widespread destruction of property and land, and a shattered national fabric.^v

Purpose

Mercy Corps recently undertook research to better understand the following questions: What accounts for the differences between the actions of youth like Samuel M. who engage in violence and those such as Peter G. who stay out of it? And how can the programs of Mercy Corps and other agencies best contribute to reducing the risk of violence among youth?

METHODOLOGY

The research aimed to fill a gap in the quantitative evidence on research on youth and conflict.

To do this, the study relied primarily on household survey data and used statistical tests of correlation to identify factors that significantly influence youth's attitudes and behaviors towards political violence and other measures of stability.^{vii} The study also used qualitative interview and observation methods to gain first hand perspectives from youth and youth development experts in Kenya on the key drivers of violence.

This research includes data from Mercy Corps' Rift Valley Local Empowerment for Peace (LEAP) project. This project, initiated in January 2009 with funding from USAID, aimed to bridge interethnic divisions and prevent violence from recurring. The intended impact of the LEAP program is increased stability in Kenya, which includes greater interaction and trust, and reduced incidence of violence amongst traditionally conflicting groups. To achieve this, LEAP works with youth to enhance their economic opportunities, strengthen local mechanisms and skills for conflict management, and promote social connections among youth across ethnic and other lines of division. This study sought to test the assumptions underlying the LEAP program logic and the broader theories of change on which they are based.

Key Findings^{viii}

What makes youth less likely to become involved in violence?

- 1) Employment and Income Generation:** The research supports the theory that if young people are employed, then they will be less likely to join violent movements for economic gain.

The following factors related to economic conditions were found to be closely linked to changes to youth's propensity toward violence:

- **Ability to satisfy basic needs:** The less often young people have to go without food, water, and other basic needs, the less likely they are to engage in or be disposed towards political violence.
- **Employment status:** Having a full or part time job that provides a cash income increases young people's likelihood to disapprove of the use of political violence.

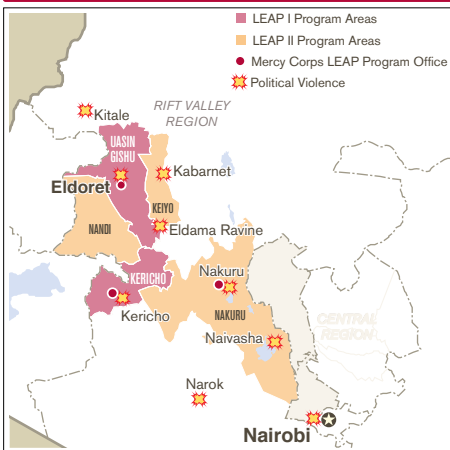
Contrary to the findings from other studies^{ix} and what was heard from the young people interviewed, the analysis of the quantitative data found no link between perceived disparities in economic conditions between ethnic groups and violence among youth.

- 2) Conflict Management and Peacebuilding Skills:** It was unclear whether youth who have the skills and forums to discuss difficult issues are less likely to use violence to solve problems.

Evidence from the study supporting this theory is sparse, however so was the data available to test it.^x The results showed that people's freedom of movement increases in locations where more peace dialogues occurred. This finding points to the contributions of peace dialogues, such as those supported by LEAP, towards mitigating the types of insecurity that affect people's ability to move



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freely to meet their basic needs and pursue their livelihoods. However, young people's participation in peace dialogues did not influence their levels of trust of or interaction with other Kenyans. One possible explanation for this is that youth were most often included in larger community dialogues rather than stand alone, youth-led dialogues, which may have limited the impact of their participation on their trust levels. The contradictory findings raise questions about if and how efforts to build young people's conflict management skills and support peace dialogues contribute to greater stability. Further testing of these links is needed given the widespread use of such strategies in Mercy Corps' and other agencies' peacebuilding programs.

3) Social Integration: It appears that when youth are socially integrated, then they are less susceptible to involvement in violent groups.

The research showed that several forms of social integration among youth consistently reduce their risk of engagement in violence:

- **Associational membership:** Youth who are members of self-help groups^{xi} exhibit higher levels of trust of other Kenyans than non-members. Similarly, youth who are actively involved in religious groups are less likely to engage in political violence.
- **Collective action:** People perceive youth as more productive and responsible in locations where youth have engaged in collective action, such as joint income generation or community development projects. More positive attitudes towards youth, in turn, were found to be closely linked to lower levels of reports of youth involvement in violence.
- **Social identity:** Youth who give greater priority to their national identity than their group identity – i.e. feel they are a Kenyan first, before their tribal allegiance – are less likely to engage in or approve of political violence.

Two surprising results were found related to social integration. First, the study found no major differences between urban and rural Kenyan youth on measures of trust, social identity, or attitudes towards or involvement in political violence. Second, neither levels of trust or interaction were found to be related to young people's risks of involvement in violence. These findings bring into question the central role that building trust among traditionally conflicting groups is presumed to play in promoting greater stability.^{xii} Evidence from Kenya reinforces this doubt: History has shown that even high levels of trust are not enough to buttress against the power of outside triggers to stoke hatred and aggression, as was seen during the 2007/8 post election violence.

"Conflict [in the Rift Valley] will only cease when people feel there is more that ties us than separates us".

District Peace Committee member, Kericho District, Kenya



Nathan Plowman / Mercy Corps, 2009

Kenyan youth who self-identify as being a Kenyan first were over two times less likely to have engaged in the political violence in 2007/8 than youth who give priority to their ethnic over their national identity.

What program interventions are most influential?

This study provides evidence of the efficacy of a number of existing peacebuilding program interventions to contribute to greater stability and less propensity towards political violence among youth. The interventions found to have the most influence were the LEAP program efforts that promoted:

- **Part-time employment for youth**, through support to income generation and cash for work activities.
- **The existence of peace dialogues**, through training community leaders in peacebuilding skills and funding of the dialogues, which were found to be associated with greater freedom of movement.
- **Youth participation in self-help groups**, via training in leadership and group management skills.
- **Collective action among youth**, such as community reconstruction projects.

“The people representing us [in government] are not youth. We are used by politicians during campaigns, then sidelined after elections.”

Young man,
Eldoret District, Kenya



Cassandra Nelson / Mercy Corps, 2005

Nearly three out of four Kenyan youth believe that ordinary people can do little or nothing to improve the situation with how government is run. Ensuring youth have constructive avenues for political participation is critical for reducing their risk of resorting to violence to promote political objectives.

What additional factors do future programs need to consider?

Several influential factors emerged from the study that warrant greater consideration within Mercy Corps' and other agencies' youth and conflict programs:

- **Political inequality:** Youth who believe that their group has less influence in politics than others are more likely to approve of and engage in political violence.
- **Civic engagement:** Youth who take action to try to address governance problems are less likely to engage in or be disposed towards political violence. The forms of civic engagement measured include joining with others to raise issues, calling in to radio shows, and making complaints to government officials.
- **Governance:** Kenyan youth's perceptions of national and local government performance are consistently low, but were not found to directly influence their likelihood to condone or participate in political violence. Rather, the main factor related to risk of engagement in violence appears to be their access to established channels to voice their grievances regarding governance issues.

These findings reinforce the points consistently raised by Kenyan youth that their exclusion from political processes and marginalization from having a say in decisions affecting their lives are major sources of their alienation and anger, and potential push factors toward violence.

Conclusions and Implications

Expanding program impact

This study's findings lend support to the further use of economic incentives and building social connections among youth across lines of division as pillars of peacebuilding programs in Kenya and similar contexts. Agencies engaged in peacebuilding efforts should seek to replicate or scale up several of the existing interventions that stood out as the most likely to improve stability. These include creation of both short and longer-term employment opportunities for youth, and support to collective action among interethnic groups of youth.

The research also points to the need to expand young people's political and civic engagement in order to significantly reduce their risk of participation in violent movements, lending support for a cross-sectoral approach in youth and conflict programming. Several Mercy Corps programs in Kenya have already internalized this lesson and are working to create opportunities for youth to influence local governance issues, and to increase young people's voice and representation in political arenas.

Areas for further research and evaluation

Because this study relied largely on the analysis of existing data, it was not able to examine several factors believed to have a major influence on violence among youth. Further research is needed on the types of employment that most influence youth propensity towards violence, the role of manipulation of youth by elites, and the factors that make youth more resilient to outside triggers such as political events or sudden economic crises. Mercy Corps should consider incorporating measures of these factors into its set of indicators and data collection tools for evaluating the impacts of its programs aimed at reducing poverty and conflict.^{xiii}

To expand the understanding of key predictors of violence among youth beyond those apparent in Kenya, it would be valuable to conduct a similar study to this one using data from multiple countries. This would enable Mercy Corps to more rigorously test its youth and conflict program theories, and to better understand the contexts in which they could most appropriately be used to inform program design.

The complete research reports summarized in this briefing paper can be found at: mercycorps.org/resources/youthEDconflictstudy

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Rodrigo Ordonez / Mercy Corps, 2008

Short-term employment generation programs for youth can serve as quick wins for stabilizing violent situations.^{xiv} But sustaining such stability requires investing in longer-term job creation that addresses young people's underlying grievances about the lack of meaningful and viable economic opportunities.

Notes and References

- i This report was authored by Jon Kurtz, Mercy Corp's Senior Technical Advisor for Research and Evaluation.
 - ii Insight Share (2010). Final Report: Participatory Video for Most Significant Change Evaluation of the Mercy Corps LEAP SPORT Program Kenya, pp 39-40.
 - iii Ibid. pp 38-39.
 - iv Only 5% of youth across Kenya, and less than 4% within Rift Valley Province reported having used force or violence for a political cause during the time period leading up to and following the 2007 presidential elections (Afrobarometer Round 4 survey in Kenya, 2008)
 - v Government of Kenya, Peace & Development Network Trust (2011). Kenya Conflict Mapping: An Insider's Perspective - Report on National Conflict Mapping for the Active Citizens Programme.
 - vi Educational Development Center (2009). Kenya Cross Sectoral Youth Assessment. USAID/Equip 3
 - vii The main quantitative data sources used were: Household surveys conducted in 2009 and 2011 as part of the Mercy Corps' Local Empowerment for Peace (LEAP) project in Kenya funded by USAID; and Afrobarometer Kenya (Round 4) national household survey conducted in Oct-Nov 2008. The Afrobarometer survey questions involving 12 month recall captured the time period of the 2007/8 post election violence.
 - viii Because the study was limited to one country, the conclusions made based on the data are limited to the context of Kenya. Though owing to the confirmatory research approach used to test broader program theories, many of the findings are believed to be transferable to programs working in similar contexts as Kenya, such as those with underlying tensions that periodically erupt into violence.
 - ix For example, Government of Kenya, Peace & Development Network Trust (2011). Kenya Conflict Mapping: An Insider's Perspective (Action Research) - Report on National Conflict Mapping for the Active Citizens Programme.
 - x There were no data from the Afrobarometer survey related to the conflict management program theory, which limited the ability to further test the underlying relationships.
 - xi Youth Self Help Groups are registered community-based organizations with income and /or social development missions. The LEAP project supported self help groups comprised of youth from multiple ethnic groups wherever possible to undertake joint income generation, community development, and other projects involving collective action.
 - xii The finding also raises questions about the appropriateness of using trust as a proxy indicator for measuring stability.
 - xiii Specifically, the tools developed and field tested as part of Mercy Corps' Evaluation and Assessment of Poverty and Conflict/Fragility Interventions (EAPC) research project
 - xiv World Bank (2011). World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development. Washington, DC.
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