Youth & Consequences
Unemployment, Injustice and Violence

As Congress considers the Obama Administration’s FY 2016 budget and requests for Countering Violent Extremism, Members should consider what the most effective interventions are to ensure assistance is actually addressing the root causes of political violence in order to decrease the appeal of and support for violent extremism.

Over the past year, Mercy Corps conducted research to better understand what drives youth to political violence. Our new report, featuring case studies from Afghanistan, Colombia and Somalia, finds the main drivers of youth political violence are not rooted exclusively in poverty but in experiences of injustice: marginalization, discrimination, corruption, and abuse by police and security forces, not poverty or joblessness.

These findings require a recalibration of how the U.S. funds stabilization and violence prevention programs. A new aid model that better integrates development, governance and peacebuilding efforts is needed in order to decrease the appeal of political violence among youth.

Key findings

1. **Jobs ≠ stability.** While unemployment is often emblematic of systemic sources of frustration and marginalization, employment status alone does not appear to determine whether a young person is likely to join an insurgency.

2. **Not jobs, but injustice.** The principal drivers of youth violence are rooted in experiences of injustice: discrimination, disenfranchisement, exclusive governance structures, corruption and abuse by government security forces. For many youth, narratives of grievance are animated by the shortcomings of the state itself, which is weak, venal or violent. Or all three.

3. **Supply-side only development programs can increase the risk of violence.** Vocational training projects not linked to meaningful opportunities in the marketplace risk raising expectations that cannot be satisfied, exacerbating youth frustrations. We came across similar findings with civic engagement programs: When not paired with meaningful governance reforms, civic engagement and “empowerment” programs can stoke dissatisfaction with exclusive, elder-dominated formal institutions. Consequently, we often found civically engaged youth to be more supportive of armed opposition groups, not less. To be effective, programs must address both supply and demand.

4. **The current aid architecture may be poorly suited to mitigate the appeal of violent movements among youth.** Successful programs must be multi-year, with long time horizons, flexible to respond to changing needs on the group, deeply engaged with local communities and have a tolerance for risk – all of which is seriously constrained by bureaucratic and administrative requirements.

These findings align closely with those from our previous research on youth in Afghanistan, Kenya, Somalia, and across sub-Saharan Africa.
**Recommendations**

In light of these findings, many familiar approaches to stabilization or CVE — such as vocational training and civic engagement programs — are unlikely, in isolation, to have much effect on stability or preventing extremism. We need a new approach: one that intentionally tackles the sources of instability and drivers of conflict, not just the symptoms.

We therefore urge the 114th Congress to:

1. **Decrease earmarks that undermine aid effectiveness.** Single-sector development programs target only one challenge facing at-risk youth while ignoring others. This is ineffective. Congress should support USAID Missions’ efforts to craft multi-sector responses to the multifaceted reasons why youth support violence. Decreasing earmarks and empowering USAID Missions would vastly improve the effectiveness of youth (and other development) interventions.

2. **Increase investments in multi-sector, multi-year assistance programs.** Successful youth programs in fragile contexts require a long term view, with the ability to integrate and layer a variety of interventions towards an often times distant goal. Meaningful impact is very difficult to achieve in 3, 6, 12 or 18 month time frames. USAID’s non-emergency Food for Peace programs – which funds long-term programs that span a relief-to-recovery and development spectrum – offers a model for replication across USAID and State.

3. **Shape any future strategies to counter and prevent violent extremism by rigorous and iterative analyses of - not assumptions about - the drivers of instability.** Too often, youth and conflict programs are designed and implemented without adequate analysis of the specific drivers. The emerging policy agenda around PVE risks repeating this mistake. Assessments of conflict dynamics – including the political and historical legacies that shape youth incentives – should inform all strategies and program design, management and evaluation.

4. **Ensure that USAID is fully included in efforts to prevent violent extremism.** Any PVE efforts should take lessons learned from USAID’s decades of experience working in the most at-risk communities and expertise in promoting non-violent solutions within and between communities and improving governance structures to include and serve those most at-risk. Upstream prevention efforts that target institutional/governmental change without strengthening institution-society relationships or bridging social capital across adversarial communities are unlikely to increase stability or prevent extremism.

5. **Legalize peacebuilding approaches to reach those most at risk.** Current US counterterrorism laws and policies often prevent peacebuilding. Under current law, American humanitarian and peacebuilding organizations risk criminal prosecution and asset freezes if they engage with any member of groups designated as terrorists. This means we are prohibited from working with them on non-violent processes of expressing political grievances, facilitating negotiations around civilian protection or supporting non-violent conflict resolution.

**Contact**

Madeline Rose, Policy & Advocacy Advisor - mrose@dc.mercycorps.org | 01 408-910-4332

Full report: ow.ly/Jh1jw