Youth & Consequences
Unemployment, Injustice and Violence

Every year, Western donors deploy vast sums of development assistance to dampen the appeal, among the world’s youth, of armed insurgencies and terrorists.

At the heart of these efforts are economic development programs. Development assistance, it is believed, can directly address the reasons young people take up arms, through vocational training and life skills development.

But to date, effective approaches have proven elusive, and few of the assumptions driving such expenditures are grounded in actual evidence.

Over the past year, we conducted research to help fill this gap.

In Afghanistan, Colombia and Somalia we found no direct relationship between joblessness and a young person’s willingness to engage in, or support, political violence. Instead, we found the main drivers of youth political violence to be rooted in experiences of injustice: marginalization, discrimination, corruption, and abuse by police and security forces.

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 development programs can increase 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.

4. **The current aid architecture may be poorly suited to mitigate the appeal of violent movements among youth.** Successful programs require long time horizons, flexibility, deep local engagement and a tolerance for risk – all of which can be seriously constrained by bureaucratic and administrative requirements.
**Recommendations**

In light of these findings, many familiar approaches to stabilization — vocational training programs, for instance, and civic engagement — are unlikely, in isolation, to have much effect on stability. We need a new approach: one that tackles the sources of instability, not just the symptoms.

1. **End siloed, single-sector programming, and support multi-sector, multi-year programs that create ecosystems within which youth can thrive.** Single-sector programs seek to address one challenge facing youth while ignoring others. This is ineffective. To mitigate political violence, efforts should be holistic. Longer-term, multi-sector programs with adaptive management structures allow development actors to respond to the fluid and dynamic systems within which youth programs operate.

2. **Target the most vulnerable, not just privileged youth in urban centers.** Where selection criteria are poorly defined or poorly implemented, implementers tend to prioritize the easiest to reach, or beneficiaries simply self-select. These are not the youth most likely to participate in violence. Targeting must be intentional, but this requires gathering greater information on the youth population through extensive pre-programming surveys and the development of “at-risk” profiles. Donors and implementers should also consider midterm assessments that aim to identify what the youth program is missing. We should regularly ask if we are in the right communities, reaching the right youth.

3. **Shape any future youth and "preventing violent extremism" (PVE) strategies 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 and programmatic agenda around PVE risks repeating these mistakes. 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. **Increase investments in two-track governance efforts that connect "youth voice" with meaningful reforms on issues of corruption, predatory justice systems and exclusive governance structures.** A state’s fragility involves more than just governing institutions, but also state-society relations. Effective governing and perceived legitimacy are equally important. Yet, few assistance mechanisms address governance in an integrated way that focuses on the processes of building healthy government-society relationships. Governance investments should focus on partnership building at the local, sub-national and national level, targeting assistance to institutions, supporting mechanisms and processes that facilitate citizen voice. Linking grassroots initiatives with a firm and strategic commitment to institutional reforms is critical.

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

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