YOUTH AT THE CROSSROADS: pursuing a positive path in South Sudan
SUMMARY

• **Young people in South Sudan exist in a precarious state.** For many youth, educational attainment is abysmally low and economic participation is weak and inconsistent. As young people are the majority of the population, they are at the forefront of their country’s violent political struggles.

• Surveyed youth in this study (Warrap and Unity States) showed a **low primary school completion rate of 55 percent**. The gender-based completion rate was consistent with national rates (with 74 percent of girls enrolling in primary school without finishing compared to 37 percent of boys). At the secondary level, three out of four boys who started secondary school finished compared to half of the girls. Results for rural youth showed only one out of ten youth who started secondary school finished, compared to one out of four urban youth. Among surveyed youth, only 35 percent reported earning an income.

• Study participants showed **high acceptance of violence** with nearly nine out of ten respondents (88 percent) stating violence was acceptable under one or more situations, with little variation between females (89 percent) and males (87 percent).

• **A market-based approach** should be the basis for all education and livelihoods programming in South Sudan. Skills training, such as vocational training, should be linked to concrete opportunities in the labor market post-graduation.

• **Programming which lacks a demand-driven approach risks fomenting discontent among youth** and may even drive youth to participate in violence.
• While labor market needs are dynamic, the **agricultural sector represents a relatively steady, vital part of South Sudan’s economy**. Young males and females should be trained appropriately for select entry points along promising value chains.

• Via a facilitative approach, **programs should seek to strengthen existing alternative educational programs** (through mechanisms such as improving teacher quality or refreshing/updating curricula) and subsequently link students into relevant programs.

• Young females in South Sudan remain severely marginalized with lower education levels and fewer opportunities for work as compared to their male peers. As cultural and gender norms have deep roots, **youth programs must work with community gatekeepers** (including males, husbands, parents, and elders) in order to build upon what appears to be initial signs of a shift in the mindset around appropriate economic opportunities for female youth and the importance of girls accessing educational and skill building opportunities.

• **Conflict dynamics in South Sudan are fluid and vary greatly from region to region.** While all programs need to be carefully localized due to inter- and intra-state differences in education access and quality and market activity, they also need to be informed by prevailing local conflict dynamics.

• **Understanding the drivers of youth participation in violence is critical to effective youth programming,** particularly in South Sudan’s volatile environment where incentives for violence are constantly changing.
Background

South Sudan is the world’s newest nation and one of the youngest with 70 percent of the population under the age of 30.¹ Although the nation celebrated independence in 2011, the country is grappling with violent internal power struggles that are driving an increase in tribal tensions and further stressing an already precarious relationship with Sudan. Due to the sheer demography of South Sudan, young people are at the front and center of their nation’s struggles. The protracted conflict with Sudan and the current domestic struggle for political power are both fought primarily by youth. In addition to the constant threat of conflict, young people in South Sudan face many difficulties in everyday life. Only 10 percent of children and youth complete primary school² and just 34 percent of the population has access to safe drinking water.³ Life expectancy at birth in South Sudan is just 54 years.⁴

Despite an abundance of natural resources, including large oil deposits, South Sudan remains one of the poorest countries in the world. More than 90 percent of the population lives on less than a dollar a day.⁵ Young people in South Sudan face extreme challenges in finding work and earning a steady income. The situation is particularly difficult for youth with limited education, young females, as well as those living outside of urban centers. Lack of basic infrastructure, systemic tribal clashes, a fractured government, poor educational systems, the heavy dependence on international aid, and crippling gender norms are among some of the factors that thwart young people in their pursuit of social and economic development.

The lack of educational and economic opportunities for youth, fragile markets, and weak governance are the legacy of a protracted conflict with Sudan and continued political uncertainty within the new nation. This uneducated, unskilled and underutilized population of young people, combined with politically motivated ethnic tensions, threatens to prolong conflict in South Sudan and further isolate its young people from pursuing productive and non-violent futures.

Assessment Overview, Objectives and Methodology

To inform future youth development policy, funding and program design in South Sudan, Mercy Corps conducted an assessment in Warrap and Unity States in July/August 2013 that explored how an integrated approach to education and livelihoods, informed by underlying conflict dynamics, could support improved outcomes for out-of-school youth. Warrap and Unity were chosen for the assessment in order to obtain responses from a mix of urban and rural sites, explore similarities and differences between traditional Dinka (Warrap) and Nuer (Unity) communities, and to build on Mercy Corps programming presence. This assessment aligns with Mercy Corps’ approach to establish youth-led and market-based programs for social, economic and political development in the world’s toughest places. Furthermore, the assessment builds on Mercy Corps South Sudan’s current education in emergencies and market development portfolio by informing future program development through a deeper analysis of the interconnectedness of education, livelihoods and conflict and gender dynamics on the lives of young South Sudanese.

⁴ World Bank, 2012.
The assessment combined quantitative data on youth perceptions taken from surveys with 107 youth, and qualitative data from 12 (6 male, 6 female) youth Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with an additional 130 youth. Youth participating in surveys and FGDs were 15-31 years old and primarily out-of-school. The assessment team also gathered qualitative information via key informant interviews (KIIs) with 21 relevant stakeholders including private sector actors, government officials, and the non-governmental organization (NGO) community. Data collection took place in Juba and Warrap State (Twic and Gogrial West Counties) from July 15-24, 2013, and in Unity State (Mayom and Rubkona Counties) from July 29-August 14, 2013.

**Objectives of the assessment:**

1. Determine youth’s perceptions on the educational and livelihood skills needed to pursue peaceful opportunities for employment and self-employment;

2. Develop a deep understanding of youth perceptions on sources of conflict and acceptance of violence; and

3. Inform the design of a youth-led, market-driven program that integrates education and livelihoods development and is informed by conflict and gender dynamics.
THE SITUATION FOR YOUTH

Education and Skill Development

The Government of South Sudan (GoSS) and the international community have made a concerted effort to improve access and enrollment in primary school since the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). However, 90 percent of South Sudanese students still fail to complete primary school. While youth participating in this study showed a higher primary school completion rate (55 percent) than the national rate, the gender-based completion rate was consistent with national rates (with 74 percent of girls enrolling in primary school without finishing compared to 37 percent of boys). At the secondary level, three out of four boys who started secondary school finished compared to half of the girls. Results for rural youth showed only one out of ten youth who started secondary school finished, compared to one out of four urban youth. Nearly half (47 percent) of youth who had stopped their education cited their inability to pay, while 14 percent stopped due to marriage. Unlike cost - which was the primary barrier for both boys and girls - marriage was mentioned by nearly one in four girls (23 percent) compared to less than one in ten boys (6 percent) as a reason for stopping their education. These findings reinforce existing research that shows that educational completion in South Sudan is low and inequitable, in particular for girls and rural students, and further indicates that cost and gender barriers force students to abandon their schooling.

Despite these low completion rates youth are not giving up on their education. Ninety-five percent of those surveyed wanted to continue their education and training and more than half (52 percent) of those wanted to fulfill their unmet educational goals by continuing formal primary or secondary school. Young people's interest in formal primary or secondary education may be partly attributable to the highly visible and consistent messaging of the government's 'Go to School' initiative that stresses the importance of enrolling in formal education. However, recognizing that 94 percent of respondents were 20-29 years old, and nearly half were married, the likelihood of them returning to formal education is low.

The challenge of older dropouts catching up on their education has led to increased interest of the GoSS and international and national NGOs in Alternative Education System (AES) courses as a vehicle for educational development. In 2010 the AES had nearly 183,000 learners enrolled in one of six course offerings with the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) contributing 87 percent of all learners. At the national level AES learners tend to be older, with more than three out of four ages 16-26, equally female and male with a close to 1:1 enrollment ratio and less likely to dropout (9 percent AES dropout rate compared to 27 percent for primary school). This study revealed that 20 percent of respondents had attended AES courses with 57 percent of those attending ALP and 66 percent of attendees completing all four years of the ALP course. While AES enrollment is still quite low nationally and among this study

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7 The completion rate of respondents from Unity state was higher at 64 percent and Warrap state lower at 25 percent.
8 Early marriage is very common in South Sudan, especially for females. UNICEF estimates that 45% of girls between the ages of 16 and 18 are married.
9 Inability to afford education includes difficulty in covering various costs associated with attending school including transportation fees, book fees, etc. The opportunity costs of school attendance are also significant for young people; many youth are expected to contribute to household income and other daily responsibilities (such as childcare, cleaning, etc.) at an early age.
cohort, its ability to capture older learners that are equally male and female and likely to complete their course makes it an attractive system worthy of continued investment and coordination with subsequent Vocational Training (VT) or livelihood development programs. AES programs also have a strong, respected reputation with most of the population.11

After formal primary and secondary education, youth respondents listed VT as a potential bridge for achieving their future goals with 19 percent of respondents interested in continuing their education through VT and 55 percent of respondents indicated that completing vocational training would be most helpful in finding a job. Across FGDs, young people insisted that skills and training are the most promising pathways to economic independence. Many young people view generic vocational and business training as the panacea to their unemployment situation. Youth expressed that having a training certificate is critical to getting work. Said one young female in Kuajok (Warrap State), “Without a certificate and even with some luck, you can only be a cleaner at best.” Generally, young people sensed that a training degree would open the doors to higher-status jobs including working in a clinic or NGO, as well as being able to open a business. However, considering that 65 percent of females and 72 percent of males felt that the education and training they received in the past was either not useful or only somewhat useful in finding work, there appears to be a gap between anticipated outcomes of education and training and reality. During FGDs, a few youth were willing to admit that vocational training was not always useful in increasing income. Said one young male from Warrap State, “Those trained can’t get work.” This finding begins to uncover a repeated theme in the study that the knowledge and skills that youth manage to acquire are disconnected from market opportunities and raise false expectations of actual employability.

South Sudan isn’t like other countries. Other countries have two-way streets, multiple lanes and you can arrive where you’re trying to go. Here, streets are one-way, one lane and you always end up at a dead end or are told you’re going the wrong way. Life is like that for youth in South Sudan - there are lots of dead ends and you have to turn back and start again.

— Male youth, Twic County, Warrap State

Economic Participation

Young people in South Sudan struggle to find work and make ends meet. Among surveyed youth, only 35 percent are currently earning an income. Of surveyed youth who are earning money, most are engaged in daily labor. Despite this dismal figure, both quantitative and qualitative data confirm that some youth are already economically active to some degree. Although the work is often unsteady and sometimes illicit, young people are already engaging in economic activity in order to meet their daily needs. For example, a visit to Wunrock market (Warrap State) illustrated that many of the vendors were young people under the age of 30. Conversations with youth during FGDs also confirmed that young people were engaging in activities (both legal and illegal) to make money. For example, during FGDs, some young women shared that they are making and selling homemade alcohol to provide them with enough money for daily food and other necessities due to lack of other options. Therefore, although there is much talk of youth being unemployed and idle (and although many are), there are still many youth who are currently participating in the informal economy. According to the survey, young people who are earning money report that their largest expense is food, followed by current household needs.

Data from the surveys provides a snapshot of the typical economic activities in Warrap and Unity States. Youth shared that the most common livelihoods activities performed in their households include jobs with local business, NGOs, and the government (36 percent) and selling agricultural products (29 percent). Surveys confirmed that work in the agricultural sector is less common in urban areas and is focused primarily in rural areas and small towns. These numbers are not surprising as 78 percent of the total population of South Sudan relies on agriculture as a primary source of livelihood with 83 percent of the population residing in rural areas. Conversations with KIs also confirmed the need to strengthen work in existing livelihoods activities, especially agriculture. Said the Undersecretary for the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA), “Agriculture is more than farming.” However, many in South Sudan have not ventured past basic farming due to lack of inputs and technical knowledge, as well as complications inflicted by years of instability and violence and the nomadic, pastoralist way of life. “Start with what they know best” was guidance provided by the MoA as well as a local agribusiness firm.

A significant factor thwarting youth in their pursuit of work is the heavy reliance on foreign labor and expertise within the private sector. There is little trust in the competency and value of local South Sudanese labor, even among the South Sudanese. In meetings with youth and other stakeholders alike, there was agreement that foreigners (including Darfurians, Ethiopians, Kenyans and Ugandans) and those who studied outside of South Sudan did better than South Sudanese in business opportunities. Said a large agribusiness company in Juba, “There are two types of youth – those who left the country and are literate and those who stayed (and are illiterate).” Foreign business owners and laborers flock to South

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Pervasive barriers to businesses

- Lack of access to capital and appropriate financial services
- Heavy reliance on specific trade routes (Khartoum, Wau, etc.)
- Poor transportation and roads
- Lack of trust beyond family circles
- Reliance on handouts (aid dependency)
- Distorted markets
- Survival mentality rather than earning mentality

12 Preventing a Lost Generation in South Sudan, Tyler Arnot.
Sudan via the knowledge they are more likely to get hired and succeed in building small and medium enterprises (SMEs) when compared to their local counterparts. “We Darfurians come here for business… Only business,” said one shopkeeper currently based in Warrap State. South Sudanese also admit that foreigners excel in running businesses and acknowledge a negative bias towards local labor. “We don’t have a business mind,” says a man from Warrap State. Therefore, even when available jobs are limited, it is often easier for foreign workers to secure employment over local laborers, even when South Sudanese themselves are hiring managers.

Despite the numerous challenges to finding work and earning an income, some young people remain optimistic. Although the majority of youth surveyed reported no income, 82 percent of youth shared that they are very optimistic about their future in some way. This optimism is shared by youth who currently have no income (80 percent saying they were very optimistic) as well as those with limited education (76 percent of youth with 8 or fewer years of schooling are optimistic about their future). In addition to wanting to find work, surveyed youth are also eager to start their own businesses with 91 of 107 young people (or 85 percent) expressing the desire to be self-employed. Both males and females alike shared interest in starting a business. Although conversations with active entrepreneurs at the market revealed myriad challenges to self-employment, this pathway may present an appealing course for youth due to current lack of available jobs and the autonomy provided by being an entrepreneur.

**The skills + capital equation**

Additionally, youth feel that skills coupled with access to capital will enable them to be financially independent. However, as evident across FGDs, there is a lack of understanding on how these acquired skills will meet current and future market needs. During many FGDs, youth were unable to articulate which specific vocational training skills are useful in the economy and which would lead to jobs. Additionally, youth largely do not know how and where to access financial services. Despite this lack of information, many youth (male and female alike) shared an eagerness to pursue vocational training and optimism that skills plus access to capital would enable them to become economically successful.

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*Young people in South Sudan feel that they have been betrayed by everyone. They do not trust others and lack a sense of commitment. Many are tied to their culture and have not learned many skills. Only a small percentage of youth in this country are employable.*

— Business owner, Juba
VIOLENT CONFLICT: Youth Perceptions and Participation

Conflict dynamics in South Sudan are complex and fluid. Until the recent national-level power struggle between President Salva Kiir and former Vice President Riak Machar, and the tribal violence between Dinka and Nuer that followed, disputes were predominantly the result of armed efforts to acquire cattle (wealth accumulation) and access land or water to raise cattle (wealth maintenance) and occurred between tribes residing within the same or adjacent counties and states.\(^\text{13,14,15,16}\) While these traditional drivers of conflict will persist, a deeper understanding of the new politically motivated conflict dynamics that led to large scale inter-ethnic violence is needed. Due to the timing of the assessment this report is limited to youth’s perspective prior to the December 2013 violence, allowing for insight into youth acceptance of violence in the lead up to those events.

Study participants showed high acceptance of violence with nearly nine out of ten respondents (88 percent) stating violence was acceptable under one or more situations, with little variation between girls (89 percent) and boys (87 percent). Three in four rural youth (74 percent) were accepting of violence compared to one in four urban youth (26 percent). Of those accepting of violence, two out of three youth (66 percent) felt violence is acceptable to defend property or goods, nearly one in four (24 percent) were accepting of violence to defend ones honor or when confident that they won’t be punished, one in five (20 percent) were accepting of violence to defend family or help family financially, or when a man needs money or cattle to pay marriage dowry. Finally, one in three (33 percent) were accepting of violence when a wife refuses sex or does not properly perform household tasks of which, surprisingly, 60 percent were women and 40 percent were men indicating a concerning acceptance among women of Gender Based Violence (GBV).

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88% of study participants accept violence

- **RURAL YOUTH**
  - 74% of study participants

- **URBAN YOUTH**
  - 26% of study participants

1 in 3 ACCEPT GENDER BASED VIOLENCE in the home.

- **GENDER BASED VIOLENCE**
  - 40% of study participants
  - 60% of study participants

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\(^{13}\) UN Strategic Assessment: Post-CPA South Sudan, Zero Draft, 1 March 2011, p5, UNDPKO, Juba.  
\(^{14}\) Challenging Orthodoxies: Understanding Poverty in Pastoral Areas of East Africa; Peter D. Little, John McPeak, Christopher B. Barrett, Cornell University, Patti Kristjanson, March 2008 (http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADM455.pdf)  
\(^{16}\) Sommers M. and Schwartz S., Dowry and Division: Youth and State Building in South Sudan, 2011.
The use of violence to defend property or goods was also a theme throughout FGDs and KII, with the word “youth” often defined as those members of the community who protect against external aggressors (Nuer or Dinka cattle raiders). While acquiring cattle through violence to pay dowry is one driver of conflict and instability, the unwillingness of young men to pay dowry and opting to “elope,” or marry without paying dowry, was described in both male and female FGDs as a significant source of intra-community conflict. Whether defending against others’ attempts to steal property for dowry, attempting to recover stolen property, stealing others’ property for dowry, or, as defined by traditional gender norms, stealing a woman for marriage without paying dowry, these findings reveal a multi-layered conflict dynamic that point to economic determinants of social and marital status as key drivers of conflict. We must now layer on politically motivated ethnic violence to this already complex and multi-layered conflict dynamic.

To identify local actors who either mitigate or exacerbate conflict within and between communities, FGDs and surveys explored conflict resolution systems and processes. Chiefs and executive chiefs were often mentioned as important conflict negotiators however, after further probing, were also revealed as instigators of conflict as a result of calling youth to action to defend or recover property. Recent events indicate that politicians are increasingly capable of mobilizing their youth base to settle political scores.17 Secondly, FGDs stated that police, where available, were called upon to hold perpetrators accountable and negotiate conflict. However, the lack of police presence in rural areas limits their effectiveness to urban areas.

THE WAY FORWARD

In late 2013, South Sudan erupted into political chaos, with violence impacting much of the country. As the situation is continually unfolding and the signposts that guide youth programs rapidly changing, Mercy Corps recognizes that a prescriptive set of programmatic guidelines cannot be applied. Rather, the environment must be constantly analyzed so that interventions for youth are appropriate and relevant. Therefore, the way forward for young people in South Sudan should not be considered as a set of detailed directions but rather a roadmap that follows the basic principles outlined below.

The Case For Market-Driven Programming

Young people in South Sudan are eager for additional training and education. However, the formal education system, as well as informal schooling and training, must ensure that these initiatives are clearly responding to local market demand. A visit to an INGO-run vocational training school in Warrap State illustrated that the students are taught traditional trades (including agriculture, carpentry, masonry, and bakery) but that these learning areas were chosen without a thorough market assessment. Furthermore, students select the course which they are most interested in — and these choices are often made on familiarity with the subject matter and popularity, rather than on whether or not these specific skills are known to be useful.

Therefore, any youth development initiative which promotes skill building must be rooted in the needs of the local economy. This approach will enable young people to build demand-driven skills which will ultimately increase their chances of finding work and may also assist in reducing some of their attitudes towards violence. Although market-based programming will likely shift from traditional aid mechanisms, it should ultimately lead to more impactful trainings as well as livelihood outcomes.

Focus On Agriculture

As agriculture plays a critical role in South Sudan’s economy, it represents an important sector for youth. The lack of diversity in agricultural production should be addressed in any intervention. In Warrap and Unity States, agricultural production is stagnant and is focused on a limited number of crops. For example, sorghum is a staple crop and is consumed by the community on a daily basis. Therefore, it is a primary crop for most farmers but is also given away in mass quantities by the World Food Programme (WFP) through large food aid initiatives. As a result, locally produced sorghum is sold at markets side by side with sorghum previously distributed by WFP and other international agencies. The re-selling of sorghum (intended as food aid) back into the market distorts prices and increases competition for one of the few cash crops in the community.
Visits to local markets illustrate that there is little variety in agricultural goods being sold. In much of Warrap State, fresh fruits and vegetables are only found seasonally and even then, in extremely limited quantities. However, it should be noted that the lack of vegetables and fruits is also influenced by weak demand for such food items. Some MoA officials noted that uptake of new crops into traditional agricultural systems in South Sudan is very challenging. Cereals (such as sorghum and maize) dominate local agriculture production with few legumes, including groundnuts, also being commonly grown and sold. Due to lack of diversity of crops, local markets are flooded with vendors selling nearly identical goods side by side. It is also important to mention that some note that low yields and poor agricultural diversification are impacted by limited irrigation, unpredictable rainfall, lack of inputs including proper seeds, and poor/missing incentives for farmers. Although myriad challenges in agriculture exist, understanding and strengthening youth’s role in the sector could enable young people to earn sufficiently as well as promote food security for their families. Furthermore, as many young people are already engaged in some form of work in both agriculture and livestock, livelihoods initiatives should first focus on strengthening the work that young people are already engaged in. According to a Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) official, INGO initiatives should engage youth at their current point of activity and strengthen the work they are already doing rather than push them in a different livelihood activity. He believes this is the most sustainable approach as communities are unlikely to follow drastically diverse economic pathways due to lack of trust (caused by the protracted conflict) as well as the presence of survival mentality (living from day to day) rather than an earning mentality.

**Conflict-Informed Program Design**

The findings of this study reinforce acquisition of cattle and access to natural resources to raise them as pre-existing key drivers of conflict between tribes, particularly the Dinka and Nuer, prior to the recent politically motivated ethnic violence. The study did not find significant divisions or tension resulting from competition for training and jobs between groups returning to Warrap and Unity states from Khartoum or East Africa and those who remained inside South Sudan during the civil war. Particularly concerning and noteworthy are the high levels of acceptance of violence under a variety of circumstances. Deeper analysis on the profile of youth who are most accepting of violence points to rural youth and youth who were unemployed because they felt there is no suitable work available. The latter cohort felt that using violence was an acceptable response in 5.4 out of twelve scenarios. In contrast, respondents who felt they were unemployed because they lack the requirements/skills (for employment) felt that using violence was an acceptable response in 1.5 out of twelve scenarios. Those mentioning that they have not yet started looking for a job did not feel that using violence was an acceptable response in any of the twelve situations.

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18 A limitation to this finding is that only 3 percent of respondents had lived in East Africa during the civil war compared to 36 percent in Khartoum, 43 percent in other parts of South Sudan, and 18 percent who did not leave their current place of residence.

19 Data analysis observed dependent variables aggregated from South Sudan Youth Survey question 55: “Tell me if in your opinion it is acceptable or not to use violence in the following cases: …” The following two aggregate variables were created from this question:
   - The binary variable “any_violence” = 1 if the respondent answered, “yes” for any of the possible cases. If the respondent did not answer yes for any case, “any_violence”=0.
   - The discrete variable “total_violence” equals the sum of cases to which the respondent answered “yes” (range: 0-12).
While we cannot conclude that higher acceptance of violence is a result of youth feeling they have skills but no work is available to them – these youth may hold cultural or other values that make available work undesirable – we can determine that these youth perceive a lack of acceptable employment opportunities. As noted earlier, the pervasive view among youth that “skills plus capital equal success”, without absorptive capacity in the informal and formal economy, has the potential to increase the frustration of youth. Coupled with young people’s high acceptance of violence in general and young people stating there is no suitable work available in particular makes for a concerning scenario. These young people may have increased expectations of their opportunities in the labor market and therefore may be dangerously disappointed if they are unable to find work. As a result, programs aiming to increase educational and vocational training attainment should be careful not to do so without a close market analysis of existing and emerging formal and informal livelihood opportunities as well as a detailed understanding of the absorptive capacity of local markets. This study indicates that doing so may unintentionally increase frustration among youth unable to find work and increase their willingness to use violence to improve their social and economic situation.

Considering the recent politically motivated violence between Dinka and Nuer, and apparent willingness and ability of politicians to mobilize groups of armed youth, pre-existing grievances will likely be compounded by renewed competition for national-level natural resources like oil, and control of ethnic strongholds like Bentiu and Bor, to consolidate political strength in the lead up to the scheduled 2015 election. Youth seeking to establish their social and financial independence and influence, yet struggling under the burden of a lack of education, relevant and marketable skills, and scarce work opportunities
to apply those skills, are prime targets for politicians searching for foot soldiers to carry out their battles to gain political influence. In light of the recent actions by Dinka soldiers and Nuer armed groups, more research is needed to understand how rapid recruitment and mobilization of boys into armed groups occurred. Alternative incentives that support South Sudan’s economic, social and inter-ethnic development must be provided to youth and must be done paying close attention to the complex and raw conflict dynamics playing out in flashpoint communities across the country.

**Gender-Informed Program Design**

While improvements in gender dynamics have been seen in recent years, in particular related to girls’ access to education, women and girls in South Sudan are exposed to considerable inequalities related to education, employment and GBV. These gender dynamics must be dissected and their impact on future development determined in order to achieve impactful and equitable programming. During FGDs, many young women said it is very difficult for females to gain status in their communities. However, said one female, “In South Sudan, boys have status at birth.”

**Education:** In direct relation to girls’ drastically lower educational completion rates shared earlier in this report, the study found that three times as many girls as boys (30 percent compared to 11 percent) identified education as the biggest challenge they face in finding work. During female FGDs, young women shared factors that contribute to this educational disparity, including parents prioritizing male children for education, the burden of household responsibilities (such as childcare, cooking, and cleaning), early marriage and early pregnancy. Encouraging shifts in attitudes did emerge through focus groups and should be built upon to garner support for future gender-informed programming. These include attitudes shared by both boys and girls that women who pursue an education are well respected and have improved status in the community.

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In this country, women gain status through education, jobs, and marriage. But boys have status just for being boys. Even a 10 year old boy has status . . . Parents won’t pay for girls to go to school, even when girls are interested. If a brother and a sister are interested in school, the boy is always the priority.

— Female youth, Gogrial West County, Warrap State
**Employment:** 25 percent of girls compared to 9 percent of boys felt that the education and training they received in the past was not useful in getting a job. This reveals that whether education or training, girls do not feel they are being adequately prepared for work. Despite this finding, when asked what levels of education and training they thought would be most helpful in finding a job, girls were equally as likely as boys to mention secondary school and vocational training, more likely to mention professional, foreign language and entrepreneurship training, and less likely to mention university or computer training. Overall, girls were more likely (72 percent) to be looking for a job when compared to boys (54 percent), indicating a strong willingness among girls to pursue work despite their past education and training challenges. Many young women also shared that it is difficult for them to break free of traditional economic roles such as that of selling tea or hairdressing. These views were confirmed on a visit to Wunrock market where the only female shopkeepers were those selling tea and shisha, as well as one woman operating a small hair salon. There are stringent cultural and gender norms around appropriate roles for women and any economic program designed for youth must seek to first understand these norms and then address them appropriately.

**Gender and Violence:** This study found high levels of acceptance of GBV when a wife either refuses sex or doesn't properly perform household tasks. Surprisingly, women were more accepting of this type of violence (60 percent) compared to men (40 percent). This finding indicates a strong cultural acceptance among women that husbands have a right to beat them if they do not act in accordance with widely accepted gender roles. Girls were also more accepting of violence than men under other circumstances including in response to an offense to one's honor and when a man needs money or cattle to pay marriage dowry. While FGDs with girls and boys identified eloping (i.e. wife stealing) to avoid dowry payments as a source of community conflict, it was unclear whether girls played a role in discouraging or encouraging eloping. More research is needed to understand how the views of girls and women, and their interactions with boys and men, encourage or discourage violence.

Similar to research on adolescent girls in other parts of the world, this study reveals early signs of the erosion of broader gender-based norms restricting girls’ education, training and employment. As a result, girls are increasingly interested in and pursuing opportunities for personal and professional development. What appears to be a longer-term barrier is dismantling girls’ own acceptance of GBV and working to break down cultural and familial norms and expectations about girls’ roles in the home and in work outside of the house. Therefore the importance of proactively recruiting adolescent girls and engaging them to customize programs to their unique needs and assets is of critical importance.
Ecosystem for Youth in Unity and Warrap States

Young people in South Sudan participate in a complex ecosystem as they try to transition to peaceful and positive educational and economic pathways. The system’s supporting functions and informal and formal rules play significant roles in promoting and preventing positive youth development. In order to understand and improve the situation for youth, we must recognize the constraints and opportunities in the system and enable the system to function more effectively and efficiently for youth.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Promote market-driven youth programming:
Youth programming in South Sudan must be intentional and initiatives must respond directly to the current needs of young people as well as the larger environment. Mercy Corps youth interventions will be based in thorough analysis and will adapt concurrently with the changing context. Traditional aid (such as vocational training courses which do not link to the current market and/or oversaturate the market) has proven not only to be ineffective in South Sudan but also may exacerbate the frustrations of youth and increase their acceptance of violence. Therefore, Mercy Corps will only develop youth initiatives which respond to specific market needs. For example, at the time of programming, if our market assessments determine that the value chain for dairy is promising for young people, our program would train youth specifically in skills related to identified entry points along that value chain.

For livelihoods programming:
Market-driven livelihoods programming ensures that all employability interventions - including vocational training, internships, transferable skills development, and entrepreneurship development - are concretely linked to pre-identified present opportunities within local labor markets. Mercy Corps will focus on both supply and demand in the local labor market – we will work simultaneously towards skills building (supply) as well as job creation via the private sector (demand). Working on job creation will include helping existing young entrepreneurs to expand and diversify their businesses. We will only promote skill building and employability training in sectors which are promising and viable as determined by labor market assessments. Our initiatives will first seek to understand the incentives of each stakeholder (youth, potential employers in the private sector, GoSS ministries) and will ensure that our goals and objectives do not distort markets or create tension both within and between communities (Dinka and Nuer). As the current political climate is volatile and the ongoing conflict is distorting markets and trade routes, research such as Emergency Market Mapping and Analysis (EMMA) should be conducted regularly to inform ongoing livelihoods programming.

For formal and non-formal educational programming: In addition to vocational training, surveyed youth also expressed great interest in continuing their education. In order to promote local actors, Mercy Corps will link with existing educational institutions, schools, (I)NGO programs, and other platforms for educational growth. Via a facilitative approach, Mercy Corps will first work to strengthen these institutions (through mechanisms such as improving teacher quality or refreshing/updating curricula) and subsequently link students into relevant programs. As surveyed youth in Warrap and Unity showed varying levels of education, initiatives in the two locations may be developed uniquely.
Focus on new and existing agricultural value chains: As agriculture and livestock play critical roles in South Sudan’s economy, it is important to understand the roles that youth play within these two value chains. Mercy Corps will endeavor to strengthen young people’s existing work within existing, promising value chains. For example, officials from the MoA believe that youth must view agriculture as a business. Furthermore, youth must see the potential in other lucrative areas of the value chain (such as storage and transport) beyond production. During interviews with key stakeholders, value chains with strong potential for youth include cereals (such as maize), groundnuts, and vegetables. Youth also need to understand mechanisms for increasing yields and expanding markets. Said one agribusiness firm, “Youth must first be aware of the potential of agriculture and then be exposed to new technologies and markets.”

Given the ubiquitous presence of cattle raiding and the dowry economy, any livestock-focused initiatives for youth must be developed thoughtfully and must not contribute to increased tensions between communities. Stakeholders within the agribusiness and livestock sector are interested in shifting youth’s focus on simply cattle to exploring opportunities in milk and yogurt production.

Improve status and role of females: Mercy Corps understands that young females in South Sudan require proactive engagement and tailored programming. Additionally, as cultural and gender norms have deep roots, our program must work with community gatekeepers (including males, husbands, parents, and elders) in order to build upon what appears to be initial signs of a shift in the mindset around appropriate economic opportunities for female youth and the importance of girls accessing educational and skill building opportunities. When possible, Mercy Corps will promote continued education for girls in South Sudan, as the returns are immense - an extra year of primary school education can boost girls’ eventual wages by 10–20 percent and extra year of secondary school adds 15–25 percent.20 Furthermore, research demonstrates that girls who stay in school during adolescence are less likely to be subjected to forced sex and, if sexually active, are more likely to use contraception than their age peers who are out of school.21

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Mercy Corps will promote tailored economic interventions which ensure safe, productive, and equitable work for young females. Our initiatives will assist young women in breaking free of traditional economic roles such as selling tea or hairdressing. However, Mercy Corps will also always ensure that economic opportunities are gender appropriate. For example, we will not encourage skill building in trades which may place women in vulnerable situations due to location/environment, transport needs, or work schedules.

Alongside this effort to build skills that raise the economic and social status of women and girls within communities, our programs will empower both men and women to question the acceptability of GBV and promote the rights of females to live free of GBV. Ultimately, programs should promote an image shared by both genders of girls and women as important decision makers within society and drivers of community development, rather than limited to the source of marriage transactions and subsequent childbearing and domestic life.

4 Analyze Conflict Dynamics and Design Accordingly:

The threats of political instability and conflict will remain for the foreseeable future and the presence of conflict will permeate every facet of life for youth. This will include pressure by elders, politicians or family to defend against outside aggression or become aggressors themselves. While dangerous, these violent acts are calculated choices by young people to improve their chances of survival, social status and communal influence. For girls, conflict in the form of GBV before and after marriage appears to remain a significant source of violence. Therefore, any youth program must take into consideration the unique conflict dynamics in the lead up to and during program design and implementation. While all programs need to be carefully localized due to inter- and intra-state differences in education access and quality and market activity, they also need to be informed by prevailing local conflict dynamics. In particular, seek to engage high-risk youth (i.e. those unemployed and who feel there is not suitable work available) in acquisition of skills that are in demand in local markets in order to reduce the number of youth vulnerable to recruitment by elders or politicians for violent activities.
ABOUT MERCY CORPS

Mercy Corps is a leading global humanitarian agency saving and improving lives in the world’s toughest places. With a network of experienced professionals in more than 40 countries, we partner with local communities to put bold ideas into action to help people recover, overcome hardship and build better lives. Now, and for the future.

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