WHY YOUTH FIGHT:
Making Sense of Youth Political Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa

Overview
Though the number of civil wars and violent battles has decreased worldwide since the 1990s, our everyday news is still filled with accounts of political violence. In recent months, we’ve seen widespread violence in the Central African Republic (CAR) and South Sudan, and attacks by Boko Haram in Nigeria and by Al Shabaab in Kenya and Somalia. Youth are often at the center of these violent incidences, but there is mixed evidence on what leads them to participate. Given the contradictory findings in the literature and in practice, Mercy Corps collaborated with Georgetown University’s McCourt School of Public Policy (MSPP) to research key drivers of youth’s propensity toward political violence in Sub-Saharan Africa. The study focused on two research questions:

• What factors correlate with youth propensity toward political violence?
• How do those factors differ according to country context?

The results of our research challenge several core assumptions that underlie many youth programs in fragile and conflict-affected states, and reaffirm the importance of context. Our findings imply that traditional interventions, such as job training and civic education, should not claim universality, and signals the large role institutions and governance play in understanding violence.

Key Findings

1. Civic Participation: A history of political action, frequent contact with government officials and being an active member in community groups were positively correlated with both participation or willingness to participate in and support for political violence in at least half of the countries.

2. Governance: Experiences with corruption and perceived unfairness of the law (or exclusion) were often associated with a greater risk of political violence.

3. Economic Conditions: The connections between support for violence and economic factors were mixed. An individual’s employment status had no effect on participation or willingness to participate in violence in a most countries, but absolute and relative poverty were strong predictors of violence.

4. Insecurity and Victimization: A history of attack in the household was consistently positively associated with participation or willingness to participate in political violence.
### What the Data Say

Our team relied on Afrobarometer Round 5 survey data from 13 Sub-Saharan African countries. Included in the sample were survey respondents from 18-35 years, reflecting the very broad definition of youth employed by the African Youth Charter. We used regression analysis to explore the correlates of youth political violence, meaning that we looked to see how (if at all) youth’s participation or willingness to participate and support for political violence changed as each of the hypothesized factors (such as education or employment) changed.

Our study examined two questions in the Afrobarometer survey: one that asked about participation or willingness to participate in political violence, and one that measured support for political violence. In comparing the results across the 13 countries, we find evidence to both support and reject our hypotheses and other common assumptions around youth development programming. The chart below, which summarizes our findings, displaces the number of countries in which various predictors of violence have a significant relationship with either support for or participation or willingness to engage in political violence. Countries where one factor is negatively correlated with support and positively correlated with participation or willingness or vice versa, are counted as both negative and positive.

#### Hypotheses:

- Youth who are actively engaged in society (through community groups or political organizations, for example) are less likely to engage in political violence because they have a nonviolent mean to channel their concerns.
- Unemployed youth are more likely to engage in political violence since their opportunity cost of doing so is low, and they may perceive potential economic gains.
- Youth who feel they are being treated unfairly are more likely to engage in political violence. This could be reflected through perceptions of relative poverty, social exclusion, or ethnic discrimination.

### Predictors of Political Violence among Youth in Sub-Saharan Africa

| Predictor                                      | Number of Countries
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Household Member Attacked</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experienced Ethnic Discrimination</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>More Active in Community</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Trust in Others</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experienced More Social Exclusion</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Perceived Freedom of Speech</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>More Perceived Corruption</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Better Perception of Government Performance</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>More Frequent Contact with Government Officials</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engaging in Political Action during Last Election</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Relative Poverty</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Higher Absolute Poverty</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Completion of Secondary Education</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion of Primary Education</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
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</tbody>
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1 The surveys were conducted in 2013 in Benin, Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mauritius, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.
A Case Study from Liberia

As a new nation, the Republic of Liberia enjoyed more than a century of relative stability before President Charles Taylor overthrew the democratically elected government in a 1989 coup d’etat. This triggered a series of civil wars culminating in over a decade of fighting. The conflicts claimed at least 150,000 lives and created approximately 850,000 refugees (United Nations, 2014). The United Nations has kept a peacekeeping operation in Liberia since 2003. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a Nobel Peace Prize recipient, won in free and fair elections in 2005 and 2011. Despite progress, two thirds of the population continues to live in poverty (World Bank, 2012). Today, major incidents of conflict are rare, and political violence is characterized by small-scale protests and riots.

Data from the Afrobarometer survey in Liberia points to both drivers and inhibitors of political violence among youth. The most significant correlate with participation or willingness to participate in political violence in Liberia is having a household member subject to an assault. Even a single instance of a family member being attacked in the past year corresponds with being 5 times more likely to be participation or willingness to participate in political violence. This shows that youth are responding to violence with violence.

Unemployed youth are 2.5 times more likely to be participation or willingness to participate in violence than those who are employed. Both relative and absolute poverty are also strong predictors of risk of violence. Given these findings, programs that boost youth employment and incomes may be effective in reducing young Liberians involvement in political violence.

An increased perception of exclusion (being treated unequally under the law), and being politically active in the last election all positively correlate with a greater likelihood to support political violence. Although ethnic conflict has reduced dramatically since the end of the war, these findings suggest that perceptions of inequality are still risk factors, particularly amongst youth that are more likely to engage in political activities. Liberian youth who believe they have freedom of speech are half as likely to believe that violence is sometimes necessary, presumably because they feel they can address their grievances through nonviolent means.

Finally, the fact that education has no significant effect on propensity for violence suggests that, although improvement education levels and quality in Liberia is certainly a top development priority, it should not be expected to reduce youth participation in violence. Additional programs that link schooling to employment and that teach youth how to productively engage in politics seem to be more important for reducing violent activity.
Conclusions

Context Matters
When trying to identify the drivers of individual acts of violence different factors will matter based on the social, economic and political context in each country and the type of political violence prevalent. A young person’s motivations to engage in political violence will be different in a country with a free press and developing democratic institutions, like in Kenya, than they will for youth in Zimbabwe – the least free country in our sample. Similarly, living in a community recovering from a decade of war will create a different set of motivations for youth in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Traditional Interventions are not Obvious Winners
Perhaps the most striking impression is the minimal results in traditional program areas such as education and employment. We only find unemployment to be positively correlated with actual participation in to violence in one country (Liberia) and with support for violence in two countries (Benin and Sierra Leone). Secondary education, another intervention workhorse, has a minimal relationship with propensity for violence, even when controlling for age, gender, and urban/rural location. But, we do find primary education to consistently hold a negative relationship with violence.

Good Governance is Key
The most consistent result across the sampled countries was the importance of factors related to government institutions. Corruption, political action, and frequent contact with government officials were positively related to both participation or willingness to participate to participate and support for violence in at least half of the countries. Varied results for other governance indicators, like exclusion under the law and perceptions of government performance, demonstrate that these are important areas to investigate when designing programs to address political violence in a country. This may be especially true for partly free or emerging democracies.

Recommendations
It is clear that the drivers of conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa are complex and varied across context. To better address these issues, donors, national governments and NGOs should:

- Tailor interventions to fit each country’s political, social, and economic context. Misunderstanding the causes for violence in a given country, could lead to counterproductive programming and even exacerbate the drivers of conflict among youth.
- Expand conflict mitigation programs and alternative avenues for expressing frustrations and grievances. Governments should invest more in providing security for its citizens, which would not only reduce the number of attacks, but may also make people less likely to seek retribution on their own.
- Provide training and opportunities for youth to positively engage their communities and government is crucially important. We recommend programs that aim to help youth constructively engage in politics, while taking into account manifestations of dysfunctional government institutions, like corruption, that could exacerbate frustrations.
- Address exclusion and ethnic discrimination through programs and policy. Interventions, whether around civic engagement, security sector reform, or education, should be intentional in encouraging inclusion of political, ethnic, and social sub-groups.

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