



L. Murphy/Mercy Corps

CRITICAL CHOICES

Assessing the Effects of Education and Civic Engagement on Somali Youths' Propensity Towards Violence

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Introduction

For far too long, evidence on “what works” has evaded practitioners working on violence reduction, particularly Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). While a vast literature exists on the drivers to violence and violent extremism, few rigorous evaluations have been done to figure out what works to prevent or reduce individuals from engaging in violence. Many existing strategies and programs are based on conventional wisdom or anecdotal information on what are perceived to be the drivers of violence. Among these, lack of equitable, quality education and political marginalization are often cited as drivers for youth joining violent groups. However, to effectively address the growing threat of political violence and violent extremism in fragile and conflict affected states, empirical research testing the impact of programs meant to reduce violence is needed.

Somalia is one context where empirical research on the effectiveness of interventions aimed at reducing youth propensity towards violence can have significant policy implications. Youth, who account for over 75% of

the population in Somalia, are simultaneously seen as the hope for a bright future and a possible source of instability. The Government of Somalia, recognizing the importance of youth in building stability, has invested in opportunities to help youth gain the skills they need to become positive and productive citizens with an underlying objective of also reducing violence. Chief among these investments has been formal education, which is a key pillar in Somalia's National Strategy and Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism. Engaging with civil society to address the drivers of violence is also called out as a priority in this policy.

Youth, who account for over 75% of the population in Somalia, are a significant force in the country's trajectory. They are simultaneously seen as the hope for a bright future and a possible source of instability.



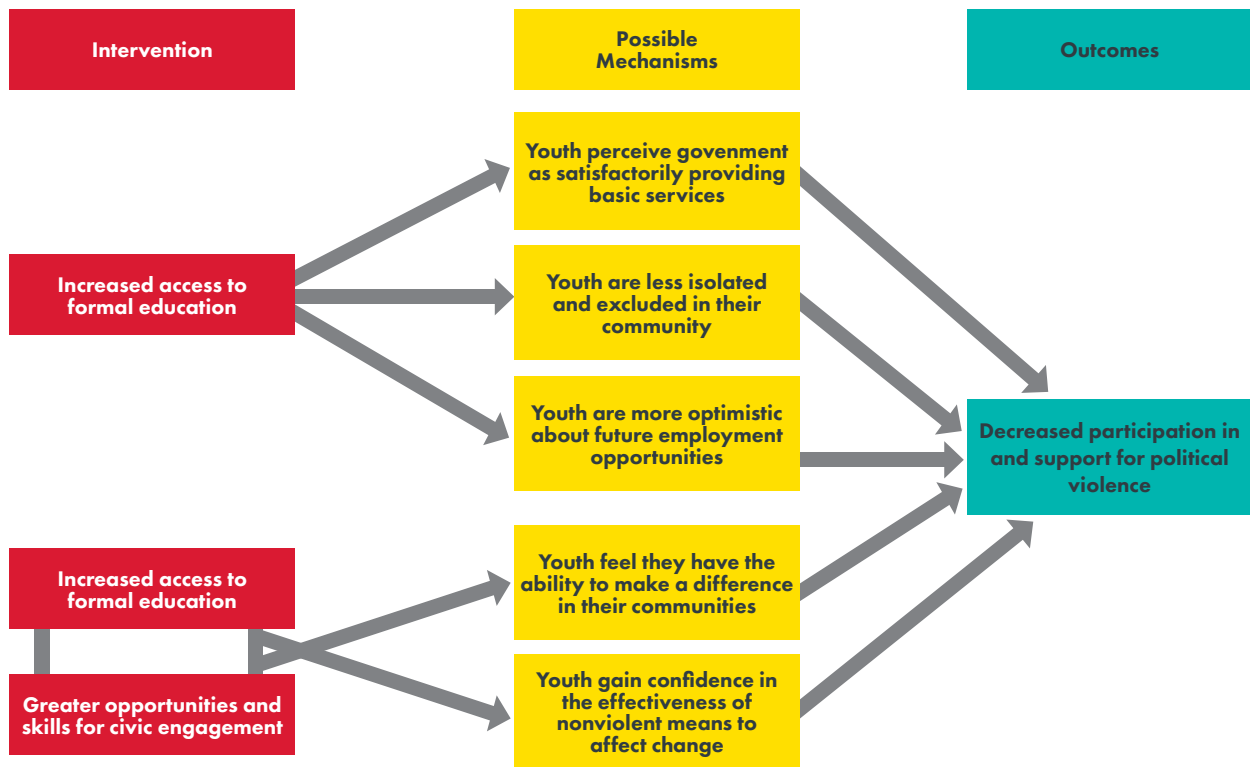
Yet, research on the relationship between education, civic engagement and political violence, including violent extremism, is mixed. While some theories posit that increasing access to formal education can reduce youth participation in violence by improving perceptions of government and young people's future economic prospects, other data indicates that if education raises young people's expectations but does not lead to meaningful improvements in governance or social wellbeing, then it might increase frustrations leading to violence. Likewise some research around civic engagement links civic participation to a greater sense of agency and more confidence in nonviolent actions—outcomes that can reduce violence. However, to the extent that civic engagement also raises expectations but does not fulfill young people's desire to participate meaningfully and make an impact in their communities, it can be counterproductive to violence reduction.

As the government of Somalia and other countries move towards actualizing CVE strategies, there is need for empirical, experimental research that tests the impact of specific interventions on reducing youth propensity towards violence. To respond to this evidence gap, Mercy Corps carried out a rigorous mixed-methods impact evaluation of a youth-focused stability program in Somaliland, funded by USAID, known as the Somali Youth Leaders Initiative (SYLI). The research tested the impact of increasing access to formal education and civic engagement opportunities on youth participation in and support for political violence via five hypothesized mechanisms, relying on survey data from over 800 youth and 25 key informant interviews.

Research Questions

1. What is the impact of providing access to secondary education on support and participation in political violence amongst youth?
2. What is the impact of providing access to secondary education and civic engagement opportunities on support and participation in political violence amongst youth? In other words, is there a marginal effect of civic engagement activities when added to secondary education?

Table 1: Hypothesized Mechanisms



Key Findings:

1. Does Improved Access to Secondary Education Impact Youth Propensity Towards Political Violence?

Overall, youth who were provided access to education through the SYLI program were 16% less likely to report participating in political violence, yet 11% more likely to support the use of political violence, as compared to out of school youth. The findings are better understood by examining the hypothesized mechanisms:

- › **Increased access to education decreased the perception that government is performing well in its provision of education.** Young people who benefited from increased access to secondary school were less likely to both think the government was doing a good job in its provision of education and to give credit to the government for their education. One reason why satisfaction with government provision of education is low is due to the poor quality of education. Continued dissatisfaction with the education system can fuel frustrations towards the government and may be linked to support for violence among youth.
- › **Youth who attended secondary school were less likely to feel optimistic about future employment opportunities.** Youth in school are more keenly aware that they may still end up unemployed. The significance of employment in Somaliland is not only the financial security that comes with it but also the respect and status derived from being able to provide for oneself, one’s family and one’s broader community. Young people’s concerns about their inability to provide for themselves can turn into a grievance leading to support for political violence, if youth believe that their government is not doing enough to address their needs.

- › **Examining perceptions of isolation and exclusion showed that being in school had a positive impact on reducing the sense of marginalization experienced by youth.** Research indicates that youth who are isolated and excluded tend to be pulled more easily into violent groups that can provide a sense of community and belonging. To the extent that attending school reduces this perceived isolation and exclusion, youth may be less likely to be allured by violent groups and engage in violence.

Taken as a whole, these results help to clarify why education can simultaneously increase support for political violence and decrease participation in it. Essentially, in school youth see a bleak future and expect government to do more to address educational concerns. These frustrations can help explain the increase in support for political violence. However, being in-school appears to deter youth from actually acting on these frustrations because they are less isolated and vulnerable to recruitment.

2. How Does The Provision Of Civic Engagement And Access To Secondary Education Impact Youth Propensity Towards Political Violence?

The combination of civic engagement activities, focused on student-led community action campaigns, and access to secondary education in the SYLI program reduced the likelihood of youth reporting participating in political violence by 14% and decreased the likelihood of youth supporting political violence by 16%. Our analysis supports the mechanisms hypothesized to link civic engagement to violence reduction.

- › **Increased youth agency may serve as a mechanism for violence reduction.** Youth who took part in the civic engagement projects were more likely to believe they have the power to make a positive difference in their community. Similarly, the combination of education and civic engagement increased citizenship responsibility, the perception that youth have a responsibility to improve their community.
- › **Building young people’s faith in the effectiveness of non-violent actions may act as another violence reduction mechanism.** Youth who were involved in student-led community action projects were more likely to believe in the effectiveness of lodging a complaint with local officials, raising an issue in a group, or discussing concerns with community leaders in bringing about a desired change. Moreover, youth involved in civic engagement activities were more likely to employ these non-violent actions. The findings indicate that participating in student-led community action projects can increase the belief that nonviolent alternatives to address concerns exist and are effective, reducing the likelihood of youth supporting the use of political violence.

Taken as a whole, our findings signal that education by itself does not address the underlying drivers of potentially destabilizing actions such as support for political violence. Education is important, but just the first step. What matters to youth is not only having an opportunity to learn, but also being able to use their skills to influence their lives and their communities, which can be facilitated partly through greater civic engagement.

A combination of formal education and civic engagement activities that focus on community action projects appears to be an effective pathway to support stability-related outcomes.



Recommendations

As violence reduction is a key priority for many governments, the results from this study have potentially far reaching and significant policy implications. Based on the results of this study, Mercy Corps is urging international donors, development agencies, and the Government of Somalia to:

- 1. Put political will and investment into the youth education and civic engagement pillars of the National Strategy and Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism:** Specifically, increase funding to address the drivers of violence rather than responding to its symptoms, using the data from this study and others as empirical examples of the effectiveness of developmental approaches to reducing violence and violent extremism. This recommendation is in line with Mercy Corps' call to increase investments as a percentage of overall aid spending in targeted violence reduction and peacebuilding programming by at least two fold within the next two years. As part of this greater investment, the Government of Somalia should increase the budget allocation to the Ministry of Youth to ensure they can play a key role in the implementation of the National CVE Strategy.
- 2. Ensure that youth education programs with violence reduction goals work to simultaneously improve access to school, enhance the quality of education, and increase access to community or civic engagement opportunities:** Donors, national governments, and operational agencies should design youth-focused violence reduction and CVE programs to take multi-pronged approaches that: (a) reduce feelings of hopelessness, isolation, and exclusion that can increase youth's likelihood of engaging in violent organizations; (b) reduce the drivers of grievance related to governance - be they government provision of quality education, corruption, or biased service delivery; and (c) provide platforms for youth to engage in their communities and with governments in order to transform their perception of grievance. The Government of Somalia should incorporate civic engagement activities centered on community service into its education strategy and curriculum.
- 3. Provide greater support to initiatives to improve the quality of education in Somaliland, and other transitional parts of Somalia:** There is strong link between the quality of education schools offer, the graduates it produces, and the potential for education to be a stabilizing force. To date, investments in education have focused primarily on increasing access, but our research indicates that resources need to be shifted more towards improving quality. Donors and the government can do this by investing more in training teachers and addressing teacher absenteeism, for example through camera monitoring which has been successful in places like rural India. Somalia should also consider increasing teacher salaries and other ways to incentivize better performance so that young people gain the skills they need for social and economic advancement.
- 4. Increase government investment, engagement, and visibility in development projects, particularly in education:** Donors should ensure local and national ownership of all development projects that seek to reduce violence or improve state-society relations, including by eliminating donor and (I)NGO branding on development projects and prioritizing partner capacity building. The Somalia government should improve the vertical linkage of education programs with investments in good governance, improved service delivery, and corruption reduction.

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