



# Examining the Links between Youth Economic Opportunity, Civic Engagement, and Conflict:

## Evidence from Mercy Corps' Somalia Youth Leaders Initiative

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## OVERVIEW

Somali youth hold the potential to contribute to positive change in their country. However, currently they are also the majority of the participants in militant and criminal groups.<sup>1</sup> To better understand the drivers of youth violence in Somaliland and Puntland, Mercy Corps examined the links between economic opportunity, civic engagement and conflict as part of its USAID-funded Somalia Youth Leaders Initiative.

The research led to a number of counter-intuitive findings, including: 1) Youth are involved in civic engagement initiatives are less likely to endorse political violence, but they are more likely to have engaged in such violence; and 2) While employment status was not found to be related to propensity towards political violence, youth who felt they had more economic opportunities were at greater risk for engaging in and supporting political violence.

We also found that youth who experienced discrimination were more likely to engage in political violence, and that

youth with greater self-efficacy were more likely to engage in or endorse political violence. This briefing provides explanations for these findings, and their implications for the Somalia Youth Leaders Initiative, as well as for similar youth development programs working in fragile, conflict-affected environments.

## Program Context

For 20 years, large parts of Somalia have been trapped in a downward spiral marked by violence, severe poverty, extremism, and criminal behavior. Consequently, promoting stabilization has become the primary aim of nearly all major humanitarian and development donors operating in Somalia. Within this agenda, youth are a critical target population given the risks they pose to peace and prosperity if they continue to be economically and socially marginalized, and the potential they hold if sufficiently engaged and motivated.

To reverse these worrying trends and leverage the potential of youth to lead Somalia's development, Mercy Corps is investing in Somalia's large youth population through the USAID-funded Somalia Youth Leaders Initiative (SYLI). Through this program, 150,000 young people in Somalia, Puntland, and Somaliland will have increased access to quality education and skills training opportunities, greater economic self-reliance, and platforms and capacities to positively engage with society.

## Research Questions and Theories of Change

The underlying theory of change of the Somalia Youth Leaders Initiative is that providing young people with quality education, skills needed to earn a decent wage, and opportunities to engage in public dialogue and civic actions will reduce the attraction of armed groups and criminal activity. This theory of change is illustrated in Figure 1 below. Many programs in conflict and post-conflict environments are based on similar premises. Yet results of recent studies that have examined these theories show mixed support<sup>2</sup>. Mercy Corps' own research has found that, in some contexts, young people's levels of civic engagement and perceived political voice can play a more influential role than employment opportunities in reducing their vulnerability to recruitment or exploitation by extremist groups<sup>3</sup>.

Given the high stakes and considerable debate, it is critical to identify which factors best predict and positively impact youth propensity towards violence in fragile contexts. And at the same time, seek to understand whether and how the underlying motivations for violence (i.e. financial incentives, status, justice) affect the effectiveness of socio-economic and civic engagement interventions.

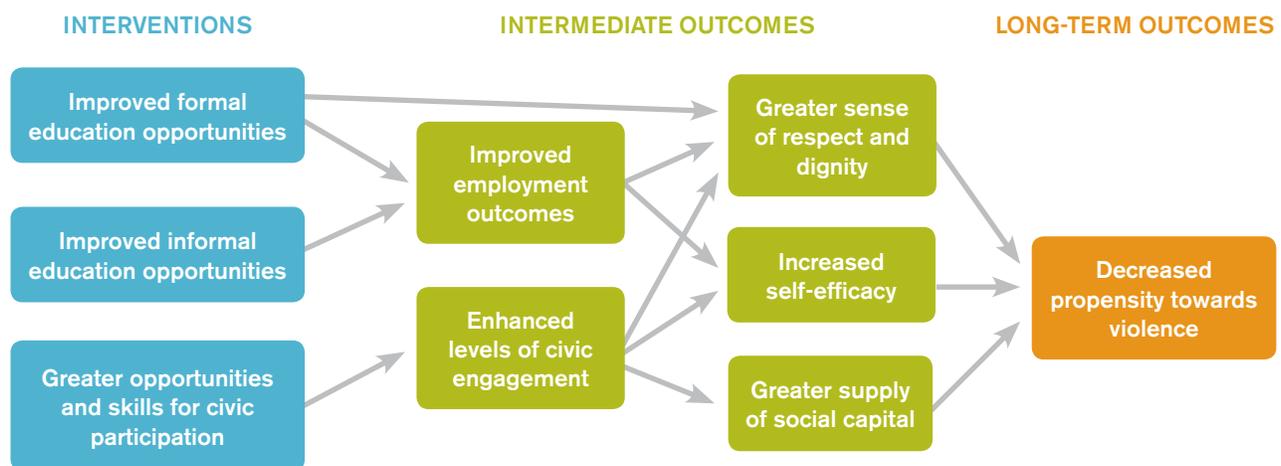
In this research, we examined two specific hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1:** If young people are civically engaged and feel they have constructive avenues for political participation, they will be less likely to become involved in or support the use of violence to promote political objectives.

**Hypothesis 2:** If young people have meaningful employment, then they will be less likely to participate in or support political violence.

In addition to these theories, we examined the role of two potential mediating variables—respect and self-efficacy—to see how they affected participation in and support of political violence. In many societies, youth—particularly young men—use violence to garner the respect of others.<sup>5</sup> Research on violent extremism shows that this is especially prevalent when people feel humiliated.<sup>6</sup> Often development interventions try to help youth gain respect through productive means, such as community service and jobs. Additionally, many interventions to promote

**Figure 1: Theory of Change for Somalia Youth Leaders Initiative<sup>4</sup>**



youth economic and civic engagement aim to help youth to control their own futures, based on the belief that it is often young people's frustration over lack of control that drives them to violently protest and/or engage in conflict.<sup>7</sup>

We tested the following theories of change to see if these intermediate outcomes of the SYLI program—increased respect and self-efficacy— help explain the relationship between civic and economic engagement and violence:

**Hypothesis 3:** If young people feel respected, then they will be less likely to participate in or support political violence.

**Hypothesis 4:** If young people feel they have control over their own futures (i.e., self-efficacy), then they will be less likely to participate in or support political violence.



## Methodology

The study aimed to fill a gap in the quantitative evidence on research on youth employment, civic engagement, and violence. To do this, the study used household survey data and employed multivariate regression to identify the factors that significantly predict youth's attitudes and behaviors towards political violence. The data analyzed were from individual surveys of a representative sample of 1,089 youth (549 in school and 540 out of school youth) in Somaliland and Puntland. The survey was conducted between February 29 and April 18, 2012 as part of the SYLI baseline study.

The analysis of the cross-sectional data used in this study has limitations. Where significant relationships between factors were found, the direction of the relationship is unknown. Furthermore, unmeasured factors may influence or explain the relationships found.

## KEY FINDINGS

### 1) Engagement and Attitudes about Violence:

Over 20% of youth in Somaliland and Puntland have either participated in violence or would do so given the opportunity. This did not differ by gender, or by whether youth were in or out of school. However, youth in school were more likely to hold attitudes that support the use of violence. So while overall, youth in Somaliland and Puntland do not support violence, there is a sizeable portion of the population that is at-risk for engaging with violent movements. While education can sometimes support peace, there are many contexts where youth are taught belligerent views in schools, which can harden stereotypes and inflame tensions. Therefore unless there is a concerted effort to teach tolerance and respect, it is unclear whether expanding access to education opportunities in of itself will improve stability.

**2) Civic Engagement:** In support of the hypothesis, youth who were civically engaged were less likely to endorse the use of violence to achieve political means. However, youth who were civically engaged were more likely to have engaged in political violence. One potential explanation for these seemingly contradictory findings is that youth who are involved civically understand the norm that they are not supposed to use violence, but either 1) do get frustrated and succumb to impulses<sup>8</sup> or 2) decided to become civically engaged to find another way to create change. These findings point to the likelihood that in the Somalia context, there is not a clear line between peaceful and violent forms of political activism. As such, youth may resort to both forms when seeking to bring about changes in their societies.

**3) Economic Engagement:** Employment status of youth was not found to be related to their engagement in or attitudes about political violence. The lack of a relationship between employment and violence is not surprising given the mixed evidence from other studies, and the fact that it is not economic incentives that appear to drive many youth in Somaliland and

Puntland towards violence. Unexpectedly though, youth who feel they had greater economic prospects were more likely to have engaged in and expressed support political violence. A similar finding has emerged in Pakistan; middle class urban dwellers were more likely to support militant groups than the poor because the poor are more likely to suffer from the actions of militants.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, while out-of-school youth who receive skills training show a lower propensity to engage in violence, they were also found to be more likely to believe that violence is justified in some cases. One of the risks of many skills training programs is that they raise expectations that are not easily met given the lack of economic opportunities. Also, trained youth often report feeling that there are economic opportunities available that they are capable of doing but cannot capitalize on because of discrimination in hiring or other barriers. As a result, youth may become frustrated in their inability to leverage employment opportunities that exist, putting them at higher risk of seeing violence as justified.

- 4) **Respect:** Youth who experienced discrimination— either in access to economic opportunities, in receiving basic services, and/or in community meetings—were more likely to engage in political violence. This is consistent with research demonstrating that feeling humiliated and excluded are factors that lead young people to join or support extremism movements or violent groups.
- 5) **Self-efficacy:** Youth with greater self-efficacy – as defined by their perceived abilities to influence decisions in their family, community, and country – were more likely to engage in or endorse the use of political violence. One potential explanation for this finding is that much of Somalia is a society where most change occurs through violence and there are few role models that espouse non-violent change. So when youth feel they are able to make a change, they believe that the best way to do that is through violence.

**Figure 2: Logistic regression analysis of predictors of behaviors toward political violence**

Variable	Have used force or violence for a political cause			
	β	S. E.	Wald	Odds Ratio
Perceive more problems with schools	-0.014 *	0.006	4.907	0.986
Positive view of community education committees	-0.005	0.003	2.445	0.995
Optimistic about economic prospects	0.026 ***	0.005	22.814	1.027
Greater self-efficacy	0.009	0.005	3.754	1.009
Greater civic engagement	0.009 *	0.004	4.072	1.009
Greater perceived voice	-0.005	0.004	2.153	0.995
Experienced discrimination	0.014 ***	0.004	15.695	1.014
Constant	-3.017 ***	0.635	22.599	0.049
R <sup>2</sup> (Nagelkerke)	0.257			
R <sup>2</sup> (Cox & Snell)	0.164			
-2 Log Likelihood	443.439			

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

**Figure 3: Logistic regression analysis of predictors of attitudes toward political violence**

Variable	Believe that violence is sometimes necessary for a just cause			
	$\beta$	S. E.	Wald	Odds Ratio
Perceive more problems with schools	- 0.008	0.006	1.455	0.992
Positive view of community education committees	- 0.002	0.003	0.369	0.998
Optimistic about economic prospects	0.024 ***	0.005	19.683	1.024
Greater self-efficacy	0.01 *	0.004	5.94	1.01
Greater civic engagement	0.008 *	0.004	4.178	0.992
Greater perceived voice	- 0.013 ***	0.004	12.152	0.987
Experienced discrimination	0.002	0.004	0.211	1.002
Constant	- 0.961	0.596	2.598	0.383
<b>R<sup>2</sup> (Nagelkerke)</b>				0.16
<b>R<sup>2</sup> (Cox &amp; Snell)</b>				0.055
<b>-2 Log Likelihood</b>				194.722

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Mercy Corps' research provides insight for both the implementation of the SYLI program and for the development of policies and other programs aimed at mitigating the factors that drive youth participation in and endorsement of political violence.

### For the SYLI program:

- Increased civic engagement and employment opportunities are not likely to be enough to promote stabilization. Based on the findings related to these factors, as well as around self-efficacy, youth need to learn how to create change through non-violent means. In program trainings and other activities, it could be useful for SYLI to include role models and examples from the Somali, Somaliland and Puntland contexts for youth to engage with and discuss. Mercy Corps' conflict management programs in other countries have had success using this approach.

- It appears that when youth feel frustrated, they begin to see violence as justified. Youth who live in conflict and crisis-prone environments often do not learn productive coping and self-control behaviors. Incorporating these life skills into the non-formal and formal education systems could exponentially increase the impact of other SYLI educational interventions on youth's attitudes and behaviors toward violence.
- The SYLI team may want to examine whether there are ways to work with the Ministries of Education in the three geographic regions to reduce perceived discrimination of students.
- One implication from these findings is that the SYLI program needs to ensure the technical and vocational training being supported are geared towards meeting actual market demands for specific job skills. This is a prerequisite for promoting real opportunities for youth for employment and self-employment.

**For the larger youth development community:**

- This research provides further evidence that the connection between youth employment and participation in political violence is not straight forward. In similar research in Kenya, Mercy Corps did find a relationship that positively linked employment to lower likelihood of participation in political violence<sup>10</sup>. However, in Kenya, politicians used financial incentives to motivate youth to engage in violence. In Somalia, economic benefits do not appear to be the primary motivation for violent behavior. These differences reinforce the lesson that it is paramount to understand why youth participate in violence when designing programs to promote stabilization.
- The relationship between perceived discrimination and participation in and endorsement of political violence was quite strong, illustrating that it is often these hurtful experiences that drive youth to engage in violence. This may stem from them wanting to protect themselves and to feel as though they are treated fairly. Therefore interventions need to provide youth opportunities to gain respect, for example through meaningful employment and community service. At the

same time, projects should work to reduce real and perceived discrimination, by ensuring that teachers represent the diversity of the student body, and provide equal opportunities to students from different groups.

- Increasing opportunities for civic and socio-economic engagement is not enough to reduce participation in or endorsement of political violence. In many cases, when youth (and people more generally) are most hopeless is when things are stable, because they do not believe things can change. It is when people feel there is hope for a different life that they often act.<sup>11</sup> As part of our youth development programs, we need to make sure that when youth feel that they can act to make change, that we support them to make wise choices. This requires imparting knowledge and skills for how to use constructive, peaceful avenues to influence changes in their communities and broader societies. Our findings illustrate clearly that it is not enough to increase young people's voice and agency, but that such efforts need to engender peaceful methods for creating change.

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<p>1 According to the 2012 Somalia Human Development Report, youth are the majority of the participants in militant and criminal groups in Somalia, including al-Shabaab.</p> <p>2 Beber, B &amp; Blattman, C. (2010). The Industrial Organization of Rebellion: The Logic of Forced Labor and Child Soldiering. Berman, Felter, &amp; Shapiro (2010) Do Working Men Rebel? Insurgency and Unemployment in Iraq and the Philippines. NBER Working Paper. ; Humphreys, Macartan &amp; Jeremy Weinstein, Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War, American Journal of Political Science, Vol. 52, No. 2, April 2008, p.447. <a href="http://www.stanford.edu/~jweinst/files/AJPS_2008.pdf">http://www.stanford.edu/~jweinst/files/AJPS_2008.pdf</a></p> <p>3 Mercy Corps, (2011). Examining the Youth, Economic Engagement and Conflict Nexus: How Youth Economic Empowerment Programming Can Enhance Stability. Paper presented at USAID Global Education Workshop, Aug 2011, Washington, DC.</p>	<p>4 In this study, no analysis was done on the role of social capital due to the lack of sufficient data on attitudes and behaviors related to this factor.</p> <p>5 The latest World Development Report on jobs lists the status that youth develop as a result of their job as an important outcome from employment.</p> <p>6 USAID (2009) Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism</p> <p>7 Lettie B., Myburgh, C. &amp; Poggenpoel, M. (2010) The relationship between the perception of own locus of control and aggression of adolescent boys. South African Journal of Education. V. 30:511-526; Moser, C. &amp; van Bronkhorst, B (1999). Youth Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean: Costs, Causes, and Interventions. World Bank.</p> <p>8 Much social psychological and public health research demonstrates that attitudes often do not predict behavior. Youth, and youth who grow up during a crisis in particular, have challenges with impulse control (Lundberg, Mattias and Alice</p>	<p>Wuerkli (eds). 2012. Children and Youth in Crisis: Protecting and Promoting Human Development in Times of Economic Shocks. Washington DC: The World Bank.)</p> <p>9 Blair, G. , Fair, C.C. Malhotra, N. &amp; Shapiro J., (2012)"Poverty and Support for Militant Politics: Evidence from Pakistan," American Journal of Political Science.</p> <p>10 Kurtz, J. (2011) Understanding Political Violence among Youth: Evidence from Kenya on the links between youth economic independence, social integration, and stability. Mercy Corps, Washington, DC.</p> <p>10 This explanation is based on the rich learned helplessness literature, which illustrates when people are willing to try to change outcomes and/or their lives. Maier, S, Peterson, C. &amp; Schwartz, B. (2000) From helplessness to hope: The seminal career of Martin Seligman. In J. Gillham (Ed.). The Science of Optimism and Hope (pp. 11-37). Radnor, PA: Templeton Foundation Press.</p>
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Photos: Cassandra Nelson/Mercy Corps

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