'Because I was angry': Myths around youth unemployment and stability, debunked

Suspected al-Shabab militants wait to be taken into interrogation after a sweep by Somali security services and members of the African Union mission in Somalia. What leads young people to join terrorists, militias and rebel movements? Photo by: Tobin Jones / United Nations / CC BY-NC-ND

At the White House's Summit on Countering Violent Extremism tomorrow, a new conversation will begin about what we know, and don't, about deterring young people from joining the world's terrorists, militias and rebel movements.

Spoiler alert: We don't know much.

Development assistance, it is believed, can directly address the reasons young people take up arms: through vocational training, life skills development and civic engagement.

Deterring young people from violent movements has never been more pressing. More than half the world's population is under the age of 30 and many live in underdeveloped, fragile countries.

In Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State group train youth as the " cubs of the Islamic State ," and in Colombia, decades of violence have been sustained by children bearing small arms. More than 300,000 child soldiers fight in conflicts around the globe, according to UNICEF. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, Islamist extremists recruit impressionable minds in mosques and madrassas. In East Africa, the Arabic name of the Horn's most feared terrorist movement — al-Shabaab — translates simply as "the youth."

In a new report, global humanitarian organization Mercy Corps looks at the plight of youth in some of the world's most conflict-prone states. In part, we wanted to interrogate some of the most persistent assumptions driving youth development assistance in conflict-prone states.

This is what we found.

Jobs ≠ stability

The crisis of youth is often depicted as a crisis of unemployment. An "economics of terrorism" narrative suggests that idle young people, lacking licit opportunities to make a living, are a ready pool of recruits for armed movements. Poverty, as a driver of conflict, combined with the booming population of young people in poor states, animates anxieties about the youth bulge, for which the guiding metaphor is the "ticking bomb."

But our evidence contradicts the assumptions driving "bread and butter" stabilization efforts. In Afghanistan, Mercy Corps' surveys of youth in Taliban-friendly Helmand province found increases in employment and income did not lead to significant changes in youth support for armed opposition groups. And in Somalia, our surveys found no relationship between job status and support for — or willingness to participate in — political violence.

Instead, we found the principal drivers of political violence are rooted not in poverty, but in experiences of injustice: discrimination, disenfranchisement, corruption and abuse by government security forces. For many youth, narratives of grievance are animated by the shortcomings of the state itself, which is weak, venal or violent. Or all three.

"I did not join the Taliban because I was poor," said one former Islamist insurgent. "I joined because I was angry."

In light of these findings, many prevailing economic development approaches are unlikely, in isolation, to make youth more peaceful. Indeed, they may make matters worse. Vocational training projects not linked to meaningful employment in the marketplace risk raising expectations that cannot be satisfied. And where programs fail to target the most marginalized — as many do — or have been manipulated by local elites, they may aggravate perceptions of unfairness.

Empowering young people would seem to be the remedy.

Yet, from a peace-building perspective, civic engagement programs yield unpredictable dividends. When not paired with meaningful governance reforms, such programs may simply stoke youth frustrations with exclusive, elder-dominated formal institutions — in other words, unleashing energies that the formal society is unwilling or unable to incorporate. This may explain why we found civically engaged youth to be *more* supportive of armed opposition groups, not less.

So what do we do?

The problem of youth violence will elude quick fixes. To dampen the appeal of armed groups, programs must address the sources of violence, not just the symptoms. Success will take programs based on rigorous research and learning, which remains, to date, an appalling deficiency.

It will also take time. In most fragile states, drivers of violence are systemic. In Colombia, conflict has gripped the country for 50 years, and a normalized culture of violence will require a generation to heal. Unfortunately, the appetite for quick solutions in Western capitals undermines many efforts in the field. The push is too often for easily counted outputs — the number of youth participating in a training program, for instance — rather than meaningful, but more difficult to measure, impacts.

But meaningful impact requires more than a good program. Where young people are driven to join armed opposition groups by the dysfunction and corruption of their own governments, success requires a coordinated, global commitment on the part of governments, development actors and donors to fight corruption, extend rule of law and ensure bad actors shape up. Empowering local reformers and youth to build more just and inclusive societies remains the best bet for a more peaceful future.

But that would require that we take the world's youth, and their grievances, seriously.

Tomorrow's summit, we hope, will encourage policymakers to do just that: take a long, hard look at the failures of the past, scuttle old assumptions and design future efforts to address the deep-seated, and legitimate, frustrations of the world's youth.

How can the international community help to reduce youth violence and radicalization? Chime in by leaving a comment below!

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