



Mercy Corps: J. Denesha

LEADERS OF TODAY

Engaging Young People in Governance

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Our world is younger today than ever before. Of the nearly 1.8 billion people between 10 and 24-years old, nine out of 10 live in less developed countries where they are confronting increasingly complex and unprecedented social, economic and cultural challenges that undermine their ability to support growth and stability. Young people are inheriting this rapidly changing world at a time of intense psychological and physical development. The possibility for peace, stability and progress in the world's most fragile places will depend, in part, on the choices young people make today and in the future. For this reason alone, young people demand and deserve our engagement as partners for change, enabling them to access existing opportunities and create new ones.

Our experience has shown young people who live in transitioning and crisis-prone societies can be transformative catalysts for change within their families, communities and society. As we grapple with the world's greatest challenges—from protracted conflict, famine and failed markets to a rapidly changing climate—the sustainability of our initiatives requires young people's ideas, ownership and active engagement. Therefore, to drive recovery and development, decrease fragility and break cycles of violence, Mercy Corps prioritizes investments in youth. We believe young people are not only our future leaders—they are the leaders of today.



Why Engage Young People in Governance?

Across the globe, weak governance exacerbates grievances and fosters distrust of and disengagement with institutions. Entrenched power dynamics lead to the exclusion of those on the margins of society. This includes young people, who often lack opportunities to participate in the decision-making and governance processes that affect their lives. While inadequate access to basic information about their rights and responsibilities inhibits their understanding and sense of civic duty, limited skills, connections and influence undermine their ability to voice demands or hold leaders accountable. Leaders and communities' indifference to young people's perspectives increasingly alienates young people, fueling unrest and squandering their ability to promote transformative change.

Mercy Corps believes there is tremendous benefit and opportunity when young people engage with their communities, understand their potential influence in the public sphere and are equipped with the skills and resources needed to voice their priorities. When young people are able to contribute to their communities and participate in decision-making, not only do they gain confidence, increase their status and strengthen their relationships with peers and adults, but communities ultimately benefit from their bold ideas and openness to change. Good decision-making requires young people's knowledge, experiences, views and values—including youth in these processes increases the acceptance, sustainability and impact of decisions.

Community participation also helps young people gain agency and purpose, stewarding them toward active citizenship and a life of engagement. Just and stable societies require citizens who are committed to promoting accountability and good governance. Meaningful engagement helps youth build these competencies and confidence. They develop capacities that transfer into all aspects of their lives—from negotiating within their household and resolving conflicts in school, to developing local and national policy. Increasing their access to policy makers and their ability to influence decisions provides a vital avenue for youth to challenge inequality and ensure institutions uphold the rights of all community members. Ultimately, providing youth with opportunities to participate equips them to make a positive difference today while preparing them for the challenges of the future.



› MERCY CORPS' FOCUS ON YOUTH

Since 2010, Mercy Corps has worked with 3.5 million young people across 33 countries. We focus on young people ages 10-24 coming of age in places where life is in a constant state of change and disruption. Decisions young people make now can set the course for society to thrive or decline socially, politically and economically. At the same time, we differentiate among young people according to age and sex because they engage in meaningful participation in different ways according to their evolving capacities.

Mercy Corps: C. Robbins

THE BENEFITS OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN SOMALIA: MERCY CORPS' SOMALI YOUTH LEADERS INITIATIVE

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. Through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded Somali Youth Leaders Initiative (SYLI), Mercy Corps enhances the potential of Somali youth by expanding secondary school access and

increasing civic participation opportunities. The program targets youth ages 15 to 24 years in the Somaliland, Puntland and South Central Somalia. Recent research on SYLI illustrated that youth who took part in the program’s 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. 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 as strategies for affecting change. Moreover, youth involved in civic engagement activities were more likely to employ these non-violent actions. Findings indicate that participating in student-led community action projects can increase the belief that nonviolent alternatives for addressing concerns exist and are effective, reducing the likelihood of youth supporting political violence.

Our Approach

Mercy Corps supports young people in contributing to their communities, solving public challenges and promoting good governance. Through our programs in transitioning and fragile contexts—from East and Southern Africa to Southeast Asia and across the Middle East—we facilitate young people’s engagement with and influence among local actors, build broader community demand for their participation, and support their active engagement in designing, implementing and evaluating initiatives. We increase young people’s civic awareness and equip them with the skills needed to demand their rights and hold leaders accountable. We foster youth networks and strengthen linkages between young people and decision-makers, mobilizing them to advocate for peaceful change. In parallel, we seek to build the capacity and incentives of powerholders to engage with young people and respond to their concerns. Ultimately, Mercy Corps aims to empower young people to believe in themselves, build strength through collaboration and shared voice, and engage actively in realizing their rights and bettering their communities.

Civic Education, Capacity Building and Leadership Development

Our process often begins by increasing young people’s awareness of their rights and responsibilities as citizens, and supporting them to develop their self-confidence and leadership skills. This can and should be done with all young people ages 10-24, even though the opportunity and responsibility to vote often comes later at age 18 or older. It is not possible for young people to meaningfully participate in governance processes if they are unaware of the opportunities to engage or the rights to which they are entitled. We ensure young people can access information about the institutions, policies and processes that affect their lives.



ENGAGING ALL YOUNG PEOPLE

As we work to increase the active participation of young people, we recognize they are not a homogenous group. Their views and the capacities they possess for engaging with governance structures vary by age, sex and cultural/contextual factors. We use specialized approaches to reach and include marginalized young voices—including those of girls and young women, ethnic minorities, young people with disabilities and other frequently excluded groups—helping ensure our initiatives are an equitable reflection of the rich, diverse communities in which young people live.

Mercy Corps: B. Manser

Mercy Corps also works to enhance young people’s life skills and civic engagement capacity both through formal and non-formal education opportunities. We assist young people in developing the skills, confidence and capacities needed to engage in the decisions that affect their lives. This is especially critical in societies where youth are not encouraged to question, speak out, express views or participate in important decision-making. Our targeted curricula support youth in building their self-esteem and self-efficacy, negotiating and dealing with conflict and effectively communicating and advocating for their common concerns. We build on this learning by providing opportunities for young people to apply these skills and contribute to their communities.

THE POWER OF ORGANIZING YOUTH IN KENYA: THE YES YOUTH CAN! PROGRAM

Following Kenya’s tense presidential elections in 2007, a surge of violence left 1,500 people dead and 600,000 people displaced. Seventy percent of those who engaged in violence were youth. In the aftermath, the country experienced a lingering fear of young people, distrust between communities and the potential for future conflict. Yes Youth Can! (YYC)—one of the largest youth empowerment programs in Kenya’s and USAID’s history—aimed to provide youth a voice in governance processes and positive leadership opportunities, increasing the role they are able to play in the peaceful growth and the development of their country. The program helped young people organize themselves into youth bungenes (i.e., parliaments) and provided them with leadership skills and organizational capacity. In advance of the 2013 elections, bungenes conducted advocacy and led campaigns to promote voter registration and peaceful turnout, and after they provided an essential platform for galvanizing youth. Through the life of the program, more than 260,000 youth in 12,000 youth groups reached over 3 million young people through community and outreach activities, and a total of 276 of the bunge members have gone on to serve in government. This group of young leaders is helping support a new leadership culture within government that is amenable to addressing youth concerns.



Mercy Corps: C. Robbins

Building Enabling Relationships and Networks

As youth begin to recognize they can add value and have the skills needed to share their ideas and insights, we help them understand the power of collaboration and collective action. Mercy Corps creates safe spaces where youth can convene to identify common priorities and develop a shared voice, often across ethnic groups or host-refugee divides. We provide targeted coaching as they develop strategies for action and campaigns for change. For example, as part of our SYLI program in Somalia, Mercy Corps has supported young people in applying their civic education through youth-led civic action campaigns, including school and community clean-up efforts, International Peace Day events, a district-wide sanitation and hygiene campaign and a sensitization campaign around the risks of migration. Working together increases young people’s influence, advances their interests and allows them to hold those in power to account.

Mercy Corps also helps youth develop relationships with local civil society organizations (CSOs) capable of assisting young people in navigating complex structures and processes. We look for opportunities to improve the organizational and technical capacity of youth-led and youth-focused CSOs so they can better elevate young people’s voices and demands. This includes helping them secure resources for youth-led initiatives. For example, through our Growth, Health and Governance program in Uganda we connected youth groups with a government grants mechanism, which enabled them to submit and win 38 funding applications, resulting in GBP 44,500 toward youth-led projects.

SUPPORTING YOUTH CLUBS: ADVANCING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN TUNISIA

With funding from the US Department of State Middle East Partnership Initiative, Mercy Corps' Advancing Civic Engagement in Tunisia (ACT) enhanced civic education and the leadership capacity of youth-led and focused CSOs. Through training, networking and small project grants, ACT increased the capacity of 40 CSOs and 378 Tunisian youth leaders to support change within their communities and successfully engage with local and regional government. The program mentored and mobilized youth to form clubs and participate in activities focused on leadership development, community service and project management. During the program, 17 youth clubs successfully carried out 103 local action projects, involving local authorities and community volunteers and reaching over 11,780 community members. Additionally, ACT funded 51 civic participation projects that CSOs and youth clubs led in coordination with local authorities. These projects addressed youth unemployment, created a civic action radio station, and provided training sessions for community members on good governance and citizenship, among other activities. Through ACT's capacity-building efforts—including the practical application of learning through community project implementation and increased collaboration with local authorities—the program built the confidence of Tunisian youth, increased their overall engagement and equipped them to bring positive change in the country's southern governorates.



Mercy Corps: CAWTAR

Facilitating Decision-Making Opportunities and Policy Dialogues

As youth develop their leadership skills and increase their capacity to engage collectively, we look for opportunities to link them with decision-makers. We facilitate opportunities at various levels—ranging from community dialogues to national forums—where youth, typically ages 15-24, can share their views with leaders. At the local level, we ensure youth have an active role in our community mobilization process.¹ And, we create space for youth to meaningfully participate in community decisions and processes (e.g., monitoring and making decisions about communal services or funding allocations for community development). At provincial and central levels, we look for openings for young people to influence policy, convening regional and national dialogues during which young people present their ideas and work to develop solutions, while ensuring youth have connections to relevant government officials, private sector institutions and non-governmental organizations.

› SUPPORTING YOUTH TO INFLUENCE POLICY

As part of its SYLI program, Mercy Corps is supporting young people's engagement in the development of the National Youth Policy in Puntland, Somaliland and South Central Somalia. This includes organizing stakeholder meetings and validation workshops to solicit input and feedback from youth. In parallel, Mercy Corps is working to strengthen ministry systems and capacities to develop and implement youth responsive policies. We expect these policies to strengthen youth's voice in decision-making and ensure local and national institutions meet young people's needs.

¹ Mercy Corps' community mobilization process builds community capacity to collectively identify needs, prioritize resources, frame solutions and work together for a common good. It seeks to empower communities to engage through collective action, enhancing their social capital, voice and influence.

Of course, it is essential that young people's priorities are not only visible, but also acted on. We work closely with decision-makers at all levels and from various sectors to build their capacity to elicit and consider youth interests effectively when making decisions. This often involves supporting governments and decision-makers in being more transparent and making their information available and accessible to young people, bearing in mind their diversity and different capacities.

Strengthening the Enabling Environment

Foundational to our youth and governance approaches are our efforts to transform the social norms and prevailing cultural values that impede young people's ability to participate. Through in-depth assessments and consultations, we try to understand the barriers to youth participation within each context. Working with young people and their champions, we co-develop actions and approaches to tackle these barriers and build an enabling environment. This includes activities that confront harmful norms and demonstrate the beneficial impact of youth's involvement. We also recognize the importance of a legislative and policy environment that is supportive of youth. As such, we partner with youth, relevant CSOs and government officials to advance young people's legal rights and institutionalize policies that are supportive of youth.

ADVANCING YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL CAPITAL IN JORDAN

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), levels of civic engagement in the Middle East are the lowest in the world. For example, only nine percent of youth between the ages of 15-29 volunteer with community organizations each month. Although there are very few legal barriers to participation, youth are rarely engaged in formal, institutionalized political processes. To address this, Mercy Corps' programs across Jordan seek to increase young people's engagement while improving ties between Syrian refugees and host communities. For example, our Nubader program (meaning "initiative" in Arabic) works with community youth centers and identifies supportive adult mentors who work with young Syrian refugees and their host community peers to lead community projects and advocacy campaigns on topics of shared interest and concern. Through these projects, young people develop the skills and linkages needed to plan and implement activities. By bringing together youth across host/refugee divides, and strengthening their connections with community leaders, Nubader aims to increase young people's social capital. Our research supports this claim showing that, when compared to young people who did not participate in the program, past participants have more friends outside their community and of a different nationality, benefit from improved safety and security, and are more optimistic about the future.

Additionally, through the Department for International Development's Conflict, Stability and Security Fund-supported Strengthening Social Capital and Reducing Tensions Between Jordanian Host Communities and Syrian Refugees program, Mercy Corps is training youth leaders on inclusive community dialogue, communication and leadership. Bringing together Jordanian and Syrian youth, workshops build their capacity to advocate for peacebuilding and promote community dialogue about potential sources of community tension, utilizing a peer-to-peer learning approach to enhance their skills and networks. To increase young people's active participation within their communities, the program works with youth groups to design and implement community events that create a safe environment for community members to interact peacefully, build trust and improve social cohesion. These efforts increase youth leadership and enable young people to serve as catalysts for peaceful interaction between host and refugee populations.

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within.

Now, and for the future.



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