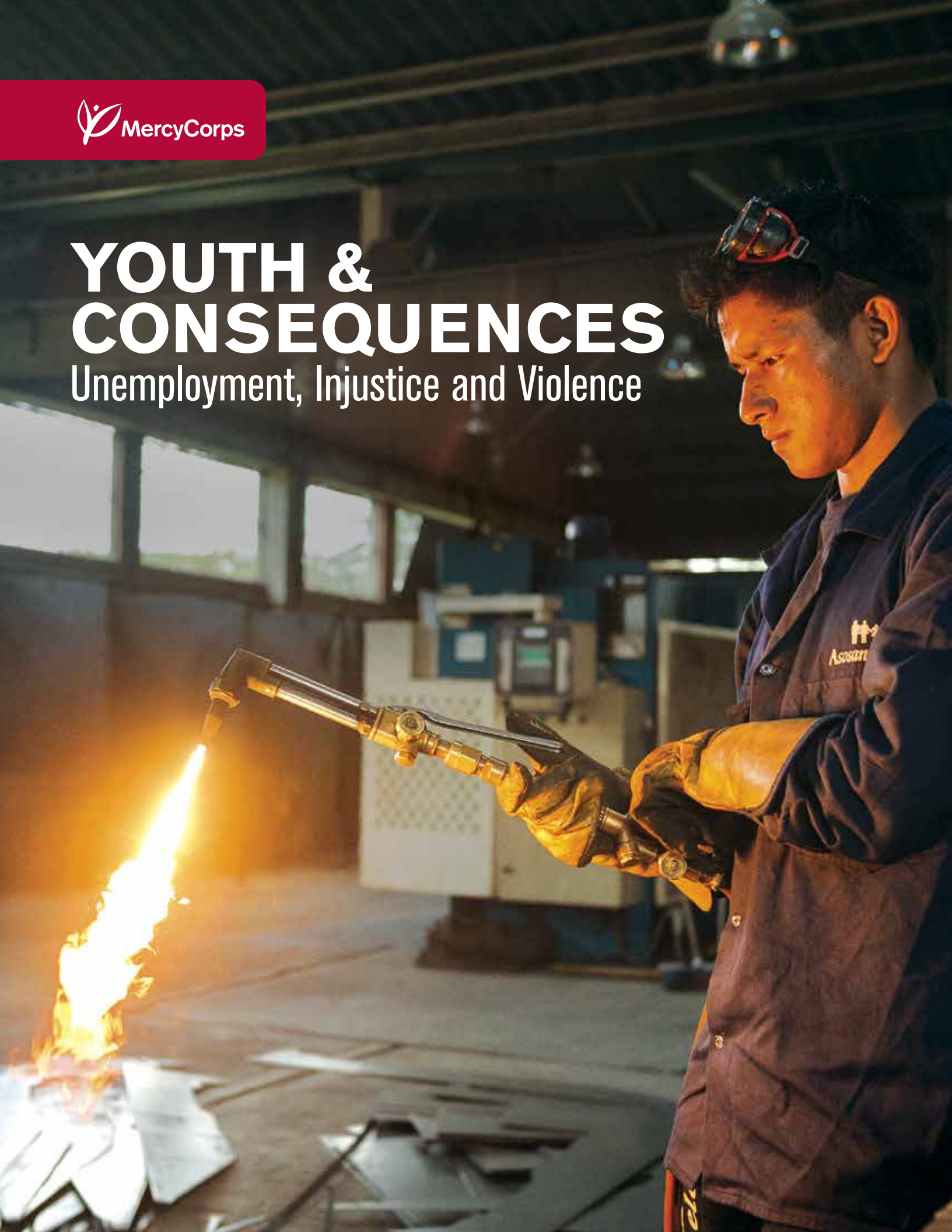


# YOUTH & CONSEQUENCES

Unemployment, Injustice and Violence



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every year, Western donors deploy vast sums of development assistance to dampen the appeal, among the world's youth, of militias, pirates and terrorists. But guided by little in the way of empirical evidence, it is an enterprise plagued by unclear payoffs and unintended consequences.

At the heart of these efforts are economic development programs. Vocational training for youth, for instance, is a favorite of donors and NGOs alike. Such efforts are informed by a widely held assumption: that idle young people, lacking licit opportunities to make a living, are a ready pool of recruits for armed movements.

There is just one problem with this narrative. It does not appear to be true. Mercy Corps' research contributes to a growing body of evidence that finds no relationship between joblessness and a young person's willingness to engage in, or support, political violence.

Drawing on interviews and surveys with youth in Afghanistan, Colombia and Somalia, we find the principal drivers of political violence are rooted not in poverty, but in experiences of injustice: discrimination, corruption and abuse by 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. Young people take up the gun not because they are poor, but because they are angry.

In light of this, many prevailing development approaches are unlikely, in isolation, to make youth more peaceful. Indeed, they may make matters worse. Supply-side 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 disenfranchised 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. This may explain why we found civically engaged youth to be more supportive of armed opposition groups, not less. Confident, outspoken and politically conscious young people, it turns out, are not the types to sit quietly by when the society around them disappoints.

These are gloomy findings, and yet there is much to celebrate. Most young people are peaceful, eager to succeed, doggedly optimistic – in spite of their circumstances – and remarkably resilient. In Colombia, in particular, we observed former child soldiers emerging from years of brutality to build a new life, start families and put a bloody past behind them.

Getting youth development right has never been more pressing. More than half the world's population is under the age of 30, and while most youth are peaceful, they nevertheless form the backbone of the world's paramilitary and terrorist groups. Countering narratives of grievance, along with offering a better vision of the future, is the job of development. The question is how to do it.

Some best practices are evident. Multisectoral programs, which offer a range of interventions – market-based vocational training, psychosocial support, protection measures – can harness good outcomes for conflict-affected youth.

But to dampen the appeal of armed groups, we must tailor programs to address the sources of violence, not just the symptoms. This requires programs tailored to explicitly and systematically

address drivers of violence. We need programs based on rigorous research and learning, to date an appalling deficiency. Success requires patient peace building between religious, political and ethnic partisans. Importantly, these efforts should be rooted in peace-building dialogues not only within communities, where there may be a consensus of grievance, but also between those with differing views.

The sensitivity of such work requires programs be implemented by NGOs that understand the local context and can navigate stateless spaces, and that have done the long, hard work of building local trust. Lengthy time horizons – along with a tolerance for risk and flexibility – are indispensable.

Unfortunately, some of the thorniest hindrances to good programs are rooted in the development architecture itself. Local ownership is too often a victim of bureaucratic and administrative constraints, or the political push for “big numbers” and quick results. Off-the-shelf, plug-and-play interventions, driven by the same assumptions, regardless of context, and designed to produce the same outputs are, unfortunately, the norm.

Yet while administrative and procurement reforms are a good place to start, the present challenge requires more than just getting one’s house in order.

Success requires a coordinated, global commitment on the part of development actors and national governments 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, we believe, the best bet for a more peaceful future.

History suggests there is reason to be skeptical: Meaningful coordination is not the international community’s strong suit. But to address the challenges facing youth in the world’s most violent, unjust places, we must be firm partners for progress.

Getting youth development right has never been more pressing. More than half the world’s population is under the age of 30, and while most youth are peaceful, they nevertheless form the backbone of the world’s paramilitary and terrorist groups. Countering narratives of grievance, along with offering a better vision of the future, is the job of development. The question is how to do it.



Afghanistan — Tony Greaves for Mercy Corps

**A young woman learns how to design and sew garments in Mercy Corps’ INVEST program, Helmand province, Afghanistan.**



Young men participate in mobile phone repair class in Mercy Corps' INVEST program, Helmand province.

A hub of the Islamist insurgency, Helmand province has in recent years seen some of the bloodiest fighting between government forces and armed opposition groups.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	6
Mercy Corps in Afghanistan, Colombia and Somalia	10
Methodology	11
Limitations	11
<b>CHAPTER I: THE JOBS-STABILITY MYTH</b>	14
Assumptions About Idle Youth	16
More Jobs = Peaceful Youth?	18
‘Because I Was Angry’	22
Looking for Something to Do	23
<b>CHAPTER II: NOT JOBLESSNESS, BUT INJUSTICE</b>	24
The Woes of Weak States	26
Lawless Spaces	27
‘A Marketplace of Ideas’: Narratives of Violence	30
A Symptom of Larger Problems	32
<b>CHAPTER III: MAKING MATTERS WORSE</b>	34
The ‘Employability’ Distinction	35
Build It and They Will Come: Challenges of Targeting	36
The Voiceless Majority: Civic Engagement Programs	37
<b>CHAPTER IV: FRAGILE STATES OF MIND</b>	40
Mending Minds and Systems	42
All About Who You Know: Social Connections and the Peace Dividend	44
‘From One World to the Next’: Integrated Approaches	45
‘I Have To Remember My Breathing Exercises’: Supporting Psychosocial Transitions	46
<b>CONCLUSION: WHY ARE WE STILL GETTING IT WRONG?</b>	48
Computer Screens and Burn Rates	49
‘You Can’t Talk to Them’	51
Beyond Widgets	51
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	54

# INTRODUCTION

Around the world, in dozens of countries, young people fight under the banners of warlords, terrorists and would-be prophets. Beguiled by false promises, or forced at gunpoint to join, youth have destabilized nations and toppled regimes. In Colombia, decades of violence have been sustained by children bearing small arms. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, Islamist extremists recruit impressionable minds in mosque and madrassa. In East Africa, the Arabic name of the Horn's most feared terrorist movement – al-Shabab – translates, simply, as “the youth.”





Jhon Freddy Salceido Perez, 19, was 13 when he joined Colombia's largest rebel group, the FARC. Demobilized child soldiers face many hurdles in successful reintegration: They lack education and employable skills, have been deeply traumatized, and are systematically discriminated against by the rest of Colombian society.

Increasingly, there is a consensus that “hard” approaches to blunting violent insurgencies are ineffective. As retired Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, the former chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, put it, we cannot “kill our way to victory.”<sup>1</sup>

This has led to an increased focus on development programs that respond to security issues in fragile states.<sup>2</sup> Development assistance, it is believed, can directly address the reasons young people take up arms, through vocational training, life skills development and civic engagement.<sup>3</sup>

But to date, effective “soft” approaches have proven elusive, and few of the assumptions driving such expenditures are grounded in actual evidence.

Billions spent on youth programs around the world have translated into few generalizable lessons. Donors, to their credit, recognize this. In 2012, USAID estimated that it spent at least USD 300 million on youth programs every year, but “data has rarely been collected that allowed an evaluation of impact.”<sup>4</sup>

Deterring youth from violence has never been more pressing. More than half the world’s population is under the age of 30, and many of these young people live in poor, violent places. While most are peaceful, young people nevertheless form the backbone of the world’s violent movements. More than 300,000 child soldiers fight in conflicts around the globe.<sup>5</sup> Many more young adults join their ranks.

Drawing on lessons learned around the world, we have focused this study on youth in Afghanistan, Colombia and Somalia. Each country has been, for decades, plagued by war. The human costs of these conflicts are immeasurable: many thousands killed, millions displaced and futures spoiled.

The economic costs, easier to fit on a balance sheet, are beyond dispute. Decades of instability and extremism in Afghanistan sired generations-long stagnation. Per capita income in 2010 was roughly what it was in 1970.<sup>6</sup> In Colombia, decades of chronic insecurity have racked up massive costs equivalent to 3 percent of GDP per year, depressing incomes and growth. According to some analysts, the costs run as high as 15 percent.<sup>7</sup> Somalia’s decades of civil war cost the country years of development. From 1992 to 2001, GDP per capita plunged 65 percent.<sup>8</sup>



1 “Admiral: Troops Alone Will Not Yield Victory in Afghanistan,” CNN Politics, September 10, 2008, <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/09/10/mullen.afghanistan/>.

2 IRC, *Investing in a Youth Dividend* (New York: International Rescue Committee, 2012).

3 USAID, *The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency: Putting Principles Into Practice* (USAID, 2008).

4 USAID, *Youth in Development: Realizing the Demographic Opportunity*, (Washington, D.C.: USAID, 2012), 4.

5 UNICEF, “Factsheet: Child Soldiers,” n.d., <http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/childsoldiers.pdf>.

6 Institute for Economics and Peace, *The Economic Cost of Violence Containment* (IEP: 2014).

7 Costs of 3 percent of GDP per year for 24 years translates into 50 percent less income than if there had been no conflict. See Alvaro J. Riascos and Juan Vargas, “Violence and Growth in Columbia: What Do We Know after 10 Years of Quantitative Research?” cited in Stergios Skaperdas, Rodrigo Soares, Alys Willman and Stephen C. Miller, *The Costs of Violence* (Washington D.C.: The World Bank, 2009).

8 Institute for Economics and Peace.



In each of these countries, insurgents and terrorists find a large pool of potential recruits. Afghanistan has one of the world's youngest and fastest-growing populations. According to 2013 data, young people aged 15 to 24 made up 34 percent of the total population.<sup>9</sup> In Colombia, that number stood at 27 percent.<sup>10</sup> Somalia's high fertility rate, and low life expectancy have resulted in a nation of children: More than half the population is under 18, according to UNDP.

The armed groups haunting Afghanistan, Colombia and Somalia are populated by youth. The purpose of this report is to understand why they join and to provide recommendations for how the development community can work to deter them.



Colombia — Miguel Samper for Mercy Corps.

Jhon Freddy Salceido Perez works at a metal factory, where he has an internship.

9 Population Reference Bureau, "The World's Youth: 2013 Data Sheet," 2013, <http://www.prb.org/pdf13/youth-data-sheet-2013.pdf>.

10 Ibid.

## Mercy Corps in Afghanistan, Colombia and Somalia

Mercy Corps currently implements a portfolio of youth projects worth approximately USD 150 million in 23 countries, and we work almost exclusively in transitional environments: places recovering from natural disasters, economic crisis and conflict.

Mercy Corps invests in youth because they represent a powerful source of hope, determination and resilience the ability to drive lasting, positive change. We believe that if youth are engaged socially, economically and peacefully, and demonstrate healthy behaviors, they will be able to lead secure and productive lives.

Across these contexts, Mercy Corps has worked with youth for years. Current and upcoming projects are summarized here:



### Afghanistan

Mercy Corps implemented the three-and-a-half-year Introducing New Vocational Education and Skills Training (INVEST) program, targeting people aged 15-35. The INVEST program, funded by the U.K.'s Department for International Development (DFID), worked to increase youth employment in Helmand by offering courses in technical vocational education and training (TVET) centers across Helmand province.



### Colombia

Mercy Corps implemented European Commission-funded reintegration programs for former youth fighters. Mercy Corps is currently ramping up the five-year “Protecting, Educating and Advancing Children and Youth in Colombia” (PEACYC) program, targeting youth aged 15-19. Funded by Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (DFATD), the program combines educational programs, psychosocial support and in-school and after-school protection measures.



### Somalia

Mercy Corps is the lead implementing organization for the “Somali Youth Learners Initiative” (SYLI), funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The program targets youth aged 15-24 in Somaliland, Puntland, Galmudug, in south central Somalia, and Mogadishu. Designed to support USAID's East Africa objective to increase stability by fostering good governance and reducing the appeal of extremism through education and civic participation programs, SYLI builds schools, trains teachers, provides informal education opportunities and organizes civic engagement programs for youth leaders.

## Methodology

The author conducted key informant and focus group interviews in each country from June to August 2014. Sources included former and current youth participants in Mercy Corps' programs, nonparticipant youth, community leaders, government representatives, local and international NGO staff and donor agency specialists. In addition, the findings in this report are based on two quantitative studies Mercy Corps conducted. The first analyzed the determinants of propensity toward political violence among Somali youth in 2012.<sup>11</sup> The second was a rigorous impact evaluation of the INVEST program in 2014, which tested the effects of job creation on young Afghans' support for armed insurgent groups.<sup>12</sup> This report also draws on a range of secondary literature, which is cited throughout.

## Limitations

This report does not claim to be comprehensive. It documents themes and issues that came up during the course of research and is offered as a reflection on Mercy Corps' experience. Its aim is to put youth voices front and center, advance good policy and, hopefully, overturn old assumptions about youth development in conflict-prone states.

## Defining Terms

Mercy Corps defines “youth” as a period of progression toward independent responsibility. The timetable for transition to adulthood varies. Particularly in transitional environments, formal or informal processes of initiation may be interrupted or delayed. In general, “youth” may vary in age from 10 to 29. As a point of reference, the U.N. – for statistical purposes – adopts a narrower band: ages 15 to 24.

This report defines “political violence” as organized, destructive acts committed outside of state control and motivated by a desire to gain or maintain power. The pursuit of a political objective – the overthrow of the state, for instance, or the subjugation of a rival ethnic group – distinguishes this from street crimes (robbery, for example) or domestic violence.<sup>13</sup>

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11 C. Moser and F. Clark, *Victims, Perpetrators, or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2001); D.A. Hibbs Jr., *Mass Political Violence: A Cross-National Causal Analysis* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1973).

12 Mercy Corps, *Examining the Links between Youth Economic Opportunity, Civic Engagement, and Conflict: Evidence from Mercy Corps' Somali Youth Leaders Initiative* (Washington, D.C.: Mercy Corps, 2012), [http://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/somaliabrief\\_2\\_13\\_13.pdf](http://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/somaliabrief_2_13_13.pdf)

13 Mercy Corps, *Does Youth Employment Build Stability? Evidence from an Impact Evaluation of Vocational Training in Helmand, Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: Mercy Corps, forthcoming 2015).

# YOUTH: A VULNERABLE MAJORITY

Youth often make up the demographic majority in countries where they are being politically, socially and economically marginalized. When those countries have rebel-armed groups, these youth are more susceptible to recruitment.

More than half the world's population is under the age of 30. By 2020, nine out of 10 people will live in emerging or developing countries.

- Afghanistan, Colombia and Somalia, the key countries discussed in this report
- All other countries where Mercy Corps works



**43.3% of Colombia's  
population is under age 24.**

Ranked 6th in the Child Soldiers Index 2014

Ranked 59th in the Fragile States Index  
(the highest in South America)

\$11,000 GDP per capita (PPP)



**64.2% of Afghanistan's population is under age 24.**

Ranked 5th in the Child Soldiers Index 2014

Ranked 7th in the Fragile States Index

\$1,100 GDP per capita (PPP)

**AFGHANISTAN**

**SOMALIA**

**62.9% of Somalia's population is under age 24.**

Ranked 1st in the Child Soldiers Index 2014

Ranked 2nd in the Fragile States Index

\$600 GDP per capita (PPP)

Sources: UNFPA, CIA World Factbook, Maplecroft, the Fund for Peace.

## CHAPTER I: **THE JOBS- STABILITY MYTH**

Contrary to the assumptions driving bread-and-butter stability programs, employment status appears to have little or no effect on whether a young person will engage in or support political violence. This should lead to a reassessment of vocational training programs alone as peace-building tools. Jobs are welcome, but a job alone does not appear to address deep-seated sources of youth frustration.

This Afghan girl's older sister took computer classes in Mercy Corps' INVEST program in 2012. Under Islamist rule, young women were unable to enroll in school.



Last summer, amid the drawdown of NATO forces in Afghanistan, the Islamists struck. Exploiting political deadlock in Kabul over a fraud-tainted presidential election, insurgents attacked government security forces in Kandahar, Ghazni and Helmand. In a series of bloody engagements, hundreds died and government forces were rolled back, ceding territory to a group that, long after its ouster in 2001, continues to style itself the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA).<sup>14</sup>

Summer offensives are annual events in this war-wracked country, but it has been, by many accounts, the “worst fighting in years.”<sup>15</sup> Afghan security forces appear to lack the resources, resolve and military competence to stave off the advance, leading political and military analysts in Europe and the US to wonder how, after years of reconstruction and billions invested, the West “lost” Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup>

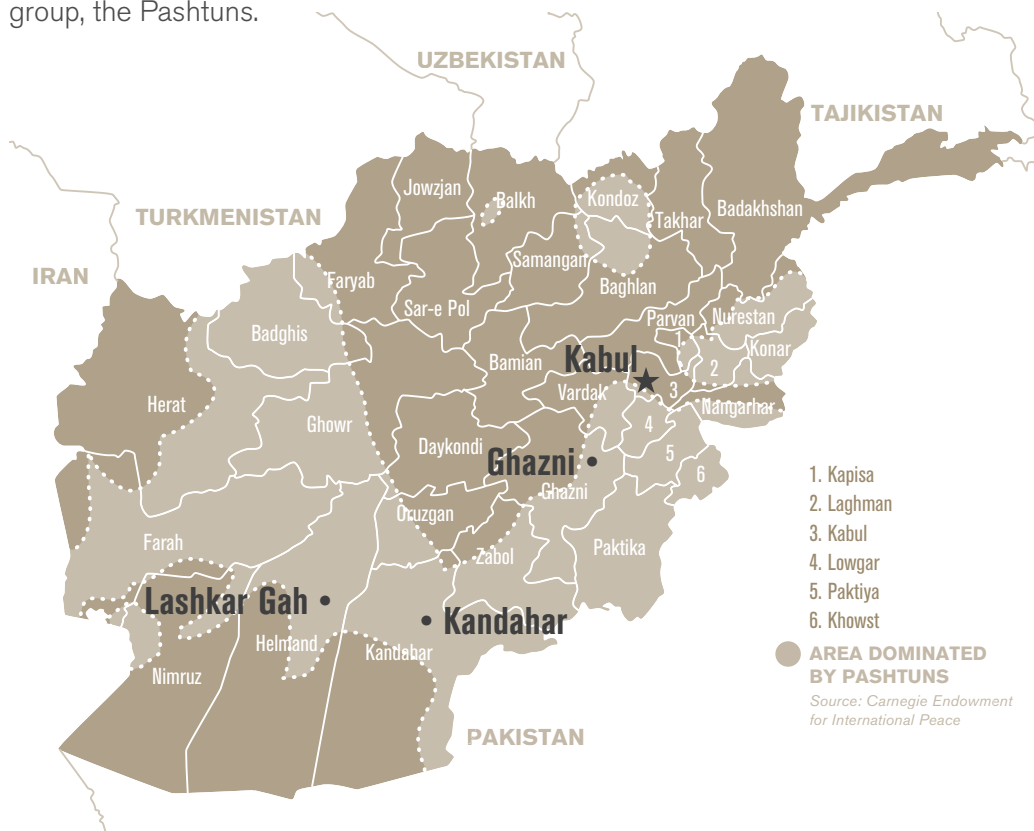
By contrast, the Islamists appear to grow stronger, enjoying durable popularity among rural Afghans and Pashtuns. In a 2013 poll, one-third of Afghanistan expressed support for the insurgents.<sup>17</sup> And many young Afghans continue to vote with their feet, flocking to the flag of Mullah Mohammed Omar, the “commander of the faithful” (amir al-mu'minin).

“Recruitment is not difficult here,” Nasir said.<sup>18</sup> A former insurgent himself, Nasir is only 23 years old, but his beard hangs to his chest. He fought with the IEA for years, routinely engaging with Afghan security forces. “The Taliban are very close by, and they know who to approach,” he said. “They come into the community, take your hand and say, ‘Come with me.’”

The question is, why do so many go along?

## Afghanistan

Since the NATO-led invasion in 2001, Afghanistan's central government has been opposed by Islamist remnants of the former regime. The insurgency has been concentrated in provinces dominated by the country's largest ethnic group, the Pashtuns.



14 Azam Ahmed, “Hour’s Drive Outside Kabul, Taliban Reign,” *The New York Times*, November 22, 2014.  
15 Erin Cunningham, “Taliban Offensive in Southern Afghan District ‘Worst Fighting’ in Years,” *The Washington Post*, August 23, 2014.  
16 The Asia Foundation. 2013. *Afghanistan in 2013: A Survey of the Afghan People*. San Francisco: The Asia Foundation.  
17 The Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2013: A Survey of the Afghan People* (San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, 2013).  
18 To protect informants’ identities, the names of most youth interviewed for this report have been changed.

## Assumptions About Idle Youth

The typical answer, in many quarters, is poverty. The crisis of youth – in Afghanistan and elsewhere – is often depicted as a crisis of unemployment. An “economics of terrorism” narrative suggests that idle youth, lacking licit opportunities to earn a living, are a ready pool of recruits for the likes of the IEA, al-Shabab or Colombia’s constellation of armed groups. Political violence is job seeking by another name.<sup>19</sup> It is a narrative that has graced the editorial pages of *The New York Times*<sup>20</sup> and that informs policy in the United Nations: Youth unemployment “fuels conflict,” according to the U.N. Office for West Africa (UNOWA).<sup>21</sup> 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, usually, the “ticking bomb.” *The Economist* has fretted about a growing mass of people who are “young, jobless and looking for trouble,”<sup>22</sup> and advocacy groups call explicitly for investments in vocational training as a remedy.<sup>23</sup>

Assumptions around the jobs-stability link are echoed by our highest officials. In a 2014 address to the U.N., President Barack Obama cited the jobless young as vulnerable to extremist ideology, saying “We will expand our programs to support entrepreneurship and civil society, education and youth – because, ultimately, these investments are the best antidote to violence.”<sup>24</sup>

In response, donors have funded a range of short-term economic reintegration programs for youth: education initiatives, microbusiness lending projects and vocational training programs with the implicit – and sometimes explicit – aim of expanding economic opportunity for the young and, in the process, dampening the appeal of militias, pirates and terrorists.<sup>25</sup>

There is little to commend such efforts. As the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) detailed in a 2013 report, there is a profound shortage of empirical evidence on the effect of employment creation on the stability of fragile states.<sup>26</sup> While economic development is undoubtedly vital, and there is a rich body of research examining the negative impacts of unemployment on individuals and societies, the evidence linking unemployment to political violence is insubstantial.

In fact, a growing body of evidence increasingly contradicts the assumptions driving bread-and-butter stabilization programs.<sup>27</sup> In Somalia, Mercy Corps youth surveys found no relationship between job status and support for – or willingness to participate in – political violence.<sup>28</sup> In Afghanistan, Mercy Corps research found that increases in employment and income did not lead to significant changes in youth support for armed opposition groups.<sup>29</sup> It’s an increasingly common finding. In various contexts, studies

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19 For the link between rapid population growth, unemployment and violence, see Henrik Urdal, *The Devil in the Demographics: The Effect of Youth Bulges on Domestic Armed Conflict, 1950-2000* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2004).

20 Nicholas Kristof, “Here’s a Woman Fighting Terrorism. With Microloans,” *The New York Times*, November 13, 2010.

21 United Nations Office for West Africa, *Youth Unemployment and Regional Insecurity in West Africa* (New York: United Nations, 2005).

22 *The Economist*, “Young, Jobless and Looking for Trouble,” February 3, 2001.

23 Publications available online at <http://populationaction.org/>.

24 Text available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>.

25 Yvonne Kemper, *Youth in War-to-Peace Transitions: Approaches of International Organizations* (Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2005).

26 ODI, *What is the Evidence on the Impact of Employment Creation on Stability and Poverty Reduction in Fragile States: A Systematic Review* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2013).

27 Christopher Cramer, “Unemployment and Participation in Violence” (World Development Report 2011 Background Paper, 2010).

28 Mercy Corps, “Examining the Links Between Youth Economic Opportunity, Civic Engagement and Conflict: Evidence From Mercy Corps’ Somali Youth Leaders Initiative” (research brief, 2013), [http://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/somaliabrief\\_2\\_13\\_13.pdf](http://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/somaliabrief_2_13_13.pdf).

29 Mercy Corps, forthcoming 2015.





Somalia – Lindsay Murphy/Mercy Corps

conducted over the past decade have found little or no evidence linking unemployment and violence.<sup>30</sup>

Advocates for the jobs-stability link point to the youth themselves: Many former insurgents cite economic factors as helping prod them into violence.<sup>31</sup>

In some cases, economic inducements may compel someone to join an armed group, but upon further analysis, this appears to be rare. While unemployment is often emblematic of systemic

sources of frustration and marginalization, **employment status alone does not appear to determine whether a young person is likely to join an insurgency.**

Violence makes people poor, but poverty doesn't appear to make them violent.<sup>32</sup>

**“I want to create employment for myself and to have a better future. That’s why I’m here.”**

**Mohamud Isse Mohamud (in green shirt) is studying to be an auto mechanic at the Garowe Vocational Training Center.**

**Violence makes people poor, but poverty doesn't appear to make them violent.**

30 For examples, see Graeme Blair, C. Christine Fair, Neil Malhotra, and Jacob N. Shapiro, “Poverty and Support for Militant Politics: Evidence from Pakistan,” *American Journal of Political Science* (2013), 57: 30–48; Eli Berman, Jacob N. Shapiro, Joseph H. Felter, and Michael Callen, “Do Working Men Rebel? Employment and Insurgency in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Philippines,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2011) Vol. 55, No. 4: 496-528; Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Maleckova, “Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* (2003) Vol. 17, Issue 4: 119-144.

31 In Kenya, for example, unsavory politicians have paid poor youth to engage in election-time violence, and economic development may, in such cases, undermine the appeal of such inducements.

32 For Mercy Corps research supporting similar findings in Kenya, please see Mercy Corps, *Understanding Political Violence Among Youth: Evidence From Kenya on the Links Between Youth Economic Independence, Social Integration and Stability* (Portland: Mercy Corps, 2011), [http://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/full\\_report\\_-\\_kenya\\_youth\\_and\\_conflict\\_study.pdf](http://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/full_report_-_kenya_youth_and_conflict_study.pdf).

## More Jobs = Peaceful Youth?

Afghanistan's Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province, is a sun-drenched city on the green banks of the Helmand River. On street corners, vendors sell watermelons and nap under awnings. Exhaust-belching tuk-tuks veer noisily along tarmacked streets, braking over speed bumps. Lashkar Gah has, over the past decade, grown rapidly. An influx of development dollars lifted rooftops and office facades. One man, a native of the city, returned last year after 13 years in Pakistan, couldn't find his childhood home in the maze of new streets. "I thought a different place had fallen from the sky," he said.

The era of rapid modernization may be coming to end. With the Western withdrawal, many worry the development dollars will dry up.

Mercy Corps has worked in Helmand province for 28 years. Our familiarity with the people and a reputation for impartiality allow us to navigate an environment where outsiders are often seen as troublesome meddlers, agents of occupying powers or harbingers of unrest.

Since 2011, the INVEST program has provided technical and formal education to young people. Classes are offered in mobile phone repair, sewing, computers and IT, mechanics and engineering. Designed and implemented in consultation with local shuras – the traditional councils of elders remain the most trusted governing bodies – INVEST grew to include 13 vocational training centers throughout urban and rural Helmand province. Classes were designed around local demand to fill identified skills gaps – and avoid glutting the market with graduates. INVEST trainers were not full-time teachers, but instead practicing masters able to provide young people with role models in the business community.

Although it is not uncommon for development programs to provide inducements such as money and food to get young people through the door, INVEST required program entrants to remit a small fee that was kept low, so that poor families could afford it, and, even then, scholarships were available. The fee-based system helped guarantee that beneficiaries were committed to the program and motivated to succeed afterward.

**Young men participate in motorcycle repair class in Mercy Corps' INVEST program, Helmand province.**

Though INVEST is about to close its doors, more than 22,000 students graduated from the program, including more than 6,500 young women. A decade-long ban on female education, issued by the IEA in 1997, isolated most women from the classroom, left a generation illiterate and undermined the skills – and the earning power – of many Afghan families. It is a gender imbalance with profound implications for development and for the country's future.

"Before I didn't know anything," said a young female graduate. "Now I'm part of the family. Before I had to ask for money. Now I provide for my mother and father."

Women are increasingly participating in the market, running businesses out of their homes or opening shops. In the heart of Lashkar Gah, INVEST opened a women's market, run and supplied by female graduates. In a tailoring shop, burqa-clad women strolled aisles of clothing, bright colors and cuts





influenced by styles from India, China and popular Turkish soap operas. A couple of doors down, past a glass storefront, the shopkeeper, a woman, sold makeup over the counter to a group of teenage girls.

“Before we had this market, there was no place for us to go,” said one of the girls, her face veiled by a maroon chadri. Behind her the shelves were lined with bottles of shampoo and boxes of Dove soap.

“At any other market, there would be men around,” she said. “And the shop would be run by a man. It’s very difficult for a girl to ask a man for” – she hesitated – “for feminine things.”

It is undoubtedly a sentiment common to many Afghan girls.

Program evaluations suggest INVEST may have catalyzed a virtuous circle of growth. Local markets have been pushed closer to equilibrium. For example, a shortage of motorcycle repairmen in the Lashkar Gah bazaar had inflated prices: It cost as much as 10,000 Afghanis – approximately USD 185 – for simple repairs. According to locals, the addition of INVEST-trained repairmen has driven prices to a stable 2,000 or 3,000. This opened the market to new customers. And because 85 percent of INVEST graduates reported an increase in income, the demand increased for other services in the market. These successes may be lighting a fire under other local actors. Based on interviews with local government, the success of INVEST’s vocational programs is forcing other pre-existing vocational schools to compete, sparking evolution and growth in the education sector.

Most INVEST graduates – 84 percent – found jobs.<sup>33</sup> But that does not mean they are less violent, according to surveys of graduates. It is a finding contrary to the assumptions behind economic theories of violence. Though most graduates are economically better off, INVEST did not result in a measurable drop in support for armed insurgents such as the IEA.

Women taking tailoring classes in Mercy Corps’ INVEST program, Helmand province, learn how to design and sew garments. For many of these women, the opportunity for education is new. Even today, women in Helmand are often confined to the home, unable to leave without the permission of male relatives.

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33 After the onset of the insurgency’s summer campaign, which upset local governance and devastated markets, employment numbers dropped to 65 percent.

## ‘Because I Was Angry’

“In my village, there was a madrassa,” Nasir said. He sat at a long table with other former insurgents: old and young men, sipping tea and eating pastries. Eid approached, and several wore red dye in their beards, and henna circles inscribed on their palms.

They were all Pashtun, Afghanistan’s largest ethnic group, by far, and the predominant constituency of the insurgents.

“It was where the young people studied,” Nasir continued. “It was where we all came together. It was the center of my village.”

“I did not join the Taliban because I was poor,” Nasir said. “I joined because I was angry. Because they (the West) wronged us.”

Today, the madrassa is gone. Five years ago, a U.S.-led troop surge sought to quell insurgents and create a safe space for presidential elections. In the Pashtun-dominated south, the British initiated Operation “Panther’s Claw” (panchai palang), and while it was declared a success, there was collateral damage. During fighting in Grishk, Nasir’s

madrassa was destroyed, and, he claimed, NATO troops later camped amid the ruins.

Afterward, Nasir said, he walked into the mountains where the insurgents camped. He was 18 years old.

“I did not join the Taliban because I was poor,” Nasir said. “I joined because I was angry. Because they (the West) wronged us.”

Around the table, the former insurgents, young and old, murmured in agreement.

But joblessness alone is not what makes young people angry. Unemployment most could accept – as circumstance, poor luck, the will of God. “Those are not things you fight against,” said a young Afghan man. Corruption by public officials, however, makes them angry, as do discrimination and being cheated or humiliated.

## Looking for Something to Do

In many fragile states, ask a person to name the biggest challenge facing youth, and the answer is almost always the same: the lack of jobs.

But joblessness alone is not what makes young people angry. Unemployment most could accept – as circumstance, poor luck, the will of God. “Those are not things you fight against,” said a young Afghan man. Corruption by public officials, however, makes them angry, as do discrimination and being cheated or humiliated. Early experiences of violence – being roughed up by security forces, for example – are associated with pushing young people into violent groups.<sup>34</sup> Yet rarely is the choice to take up arms simply an economic one. Ideas and experiences appear to be more important. Dignity matters, not dollars. From El Salvador to Southeast Asia, studies find that a far more consistent predictor of political violence is injustice.<sup>35</sup>

Unfortunately, fragile states are places of routine injustice. Whereas the children of elites study in foreign universities and cruise into posh government jobs, most young people scramble to survive. The most marginalized describe being routinely cheated by unsavory employers or harassed by police, with no avenues for appeal. In rural Colombia, for instance, youth lack meaningful opportunities for work or education and are subject to everyday offenses: Child abuse and gender-based violence are common. Young women, in particular, chafe under the daily humiliations of entrenched misogyny, according to research by Mercy Corps and the International Organization of Migration (IOM).<sup>36</sup>

Some Somali youth, dreaming of a better life in Europe, emigrate, making the long trek across the Sahara toward the Mediterranean’s shores, risking death and enslavement on the way. Those who stay behind complain bitterly of systematic corruption, nepotism, and unresponsive government officials and clan leaders.<sup>37</sup> Somaliland elections are increasingly exercises in clan mobilization.<sup>38</sup> In Puntland, the upper echelons of government are dominated by international clan elites holding foreign passports: Many, having worked or studied abroad, return to Somalia to set up businesses, sit in Parliament or take positions in the ministries. They are, according to a senior official in Puntland’s ministry of education, a venal “temporary society” sucking Somalia dry. In Puntland, public payrolls are reportedly drained by “ghost salaries” collected by absent but well-connected clan elites reportedly drain public payrolls.<sup>39</sup>

“Often you will hear people say joblessness is the biggest problem for the youth,” said a young Somali woman. “And unemployment is a major problem, but underneath that is hopelessness and a belief that there is no fairness. Young people get angry and frustrated and look for something to do.”

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34 This is a common finding, particularly in the rich body of research on youth violence in developed countries. For example, see Linda Dahlberg, “Youth Violence in the United States: Major Trends, Risk Factors, and Prevention Approaches,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 14, no. 4 (May 1998): 259-272.

35 Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003). See also Christopher Blattman, “Does Poverty Lead to Violence?” (presentation, February 2011), slides available online: <http://dri.fas.nyu.edu/docs/IO/19312/BlattmanPPT.pdf>.

36 Eduardo Aguirre Davila, *Individual, Family, Social, Community and Institutional Characteristics Associated With the De-linkage and Reintegration of Adolescents and Young Women who Have Belonged to Illegal Armed Groups* (translated) (Washington, D.C./Bogota: Mercy Corps and IOM, 2013).

37 It’s worth noting that in Somalia’s recent history, the best successes of governance – in Somaliland and Puntland – have been orchestrated not through formal (and externally supported) state institutions, but according to traditional practices based on kinship rights, customary law (Xeer) and Islam. (See Alex de Waal, “Getting Somalia Right This Time,” *The New York Times*, February 21, 2012.) However, these institutions, generally speaking, do not provide many meaningful avenues for youth participation.

38 Ahmed M.I. Egal, “Keeping it in the Clan: Somaliland’s Tribal Turn under Silanyo,” *Think Africa Press*, August 12, 2013, <http://thinkafricapress.com/somalia/keeping-clan-somaliland-silanyo-tribal-turn-kulmiye>.

39 Puntland Development Research Centre, *Puntland Youth: Challenges, Prospects and Opportunities* (Garowe, Puntland: Ministry of Education, 2013).

## CHAPTER II: **NOT JOBLESSNESS, BUT INJUSTICE**

The drivers of political violence are rooted in the social fabric of weak states: Routine injustice, corruption and normalized violence animate, for many youth, legitimate narratives of grievance. Armed groups preying on the youth, meanwhile, are able to capitalize on the failure of the state to offer alternative sources of meaning.



Ahmed, 25, graduated from The Somali Youth Leadership Initiative's vocational training program in early 2013 and managed to find work. He'd been unemployed for three years. "It was such a long time," he said. "You feel you are not worth anything."



“We’re outsiders in our own country,” Yusuf said. “We have no voice in Somalia, and therefore we have no future.”

Yusuf grew up in the ancient town of Eyl on the eastern Somali coast. The waters off the Horn of Africa are rich with tuna, Spanish mackerel, sardines and shallow-water shrimp and for generations have supported fishermen such as Yusuf’s father. Every morning he ventured from shore in a *hour*, a common rowboat, long pulls of the oars propelling him out to sea. But the piracy crisis put an end to that. Coalition naval forces, dispatched to police the waters off the Horn, occasionally failed to distinguish between pirates and fishermen trying to make a living off the coast.<sup>40</sup>

“Even if you aren’t a pirate, you can’t go into the water,” Yusuf said. “The international community’s ships have taken people, and we’ve never seen them again. Now the fishermen fear the sea.”

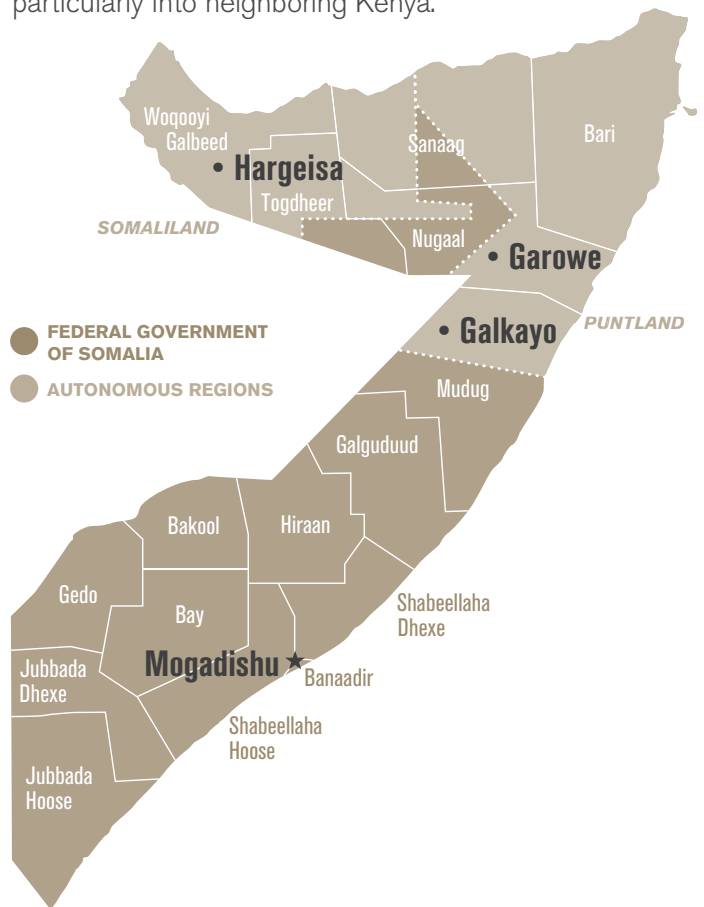
Yusuf’s family fled to Garowe, the capital of Puntland. It is a city of constant wind. Pigeons, nesting in the eaves, huddle against sudden gusts, or float, suspended, on an opposing current. Atop a security wall, caught in the coils of barbed wire, bright plastic bags flutter and snap like tattered flags. Every vacant lot is an improvised soccer field.

Yusuf and his family live in a small, metal-sided building, just outside of the city, in an internally displaced persons (IDPs) camp that the residents, for reasons that remain elusive, have nicknamed “Washington, D.C.”

As an outsider in Puntland, he said, he has no relations to the local clans, and thus no influence with local authorities. “I’ve had to tolerate everything,” he said, including harassment from local officials and, for several days, wrongful imprisonment by police. “But if you try to do anything, they’ll make it worse for you. So you have to hide your anger.”

## Somalia .....

Riven by conflict, greater Somalia has fractured into independent Puntland, self-governing Somaliland, and a chaotic southern region once dominated by al-Shabab. In recent years, however, the Islamist group has been rolled back by the African Union Mission in Somalia’s (AMISOM) forces. The insurgents have adapted, attempting to expand into the north and internationally, particularly into neighboring Kenya.



40 Amedeo Policante, “The New Pirate Wars: The World Market as Imperial Formation,” *Global Discourse* 3, no. 1 (2013): 52-71.

## The Woes of Weak States

The drivers of political violence are rooted in the social fabric of fragile states: Routine injustice, corruption and normalized violence animate, for many youth, legitimate narratives of grievance.

This marginalization is a persistent source of hostility. As researcher Marc Sommers has noted, though youth are a demographic majority in fragile states, they exist on the political and social fringe. Past research has found that young people who do not feel represented by a political party are two or three times more likely to take up arms.<sup>41</sup> Mercy Corps' analysis of Afrobarometer surveys in 13 sub-Saharan African countries found poor governance to be a consistent driver of violence.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, DFID, in a 12-country consultation with youth, found the single most important issue cited by participants was governance. This was particularly evident in Colombia and Africa.<sup>43</sup>

Government illegitimacy fuels insurgency. Along with Afghanistan, Somalia sits at the bottom of an international ranking of public perceptions of corruption.<sup>44</sup> While al-Shabab's radical turn, in recent years, has depressed its appeal, the Islamists' rejection of clanism continues to resonate among Somali youth.<sup>45</sup>

In Afghanistan, the perceived corruption of the central government provides insurgents the opportunity to play a familiar hand. The Islamists originally attracted popular support as a protest movement and state-building exercise. In the early 1990s, they imposed stability and rule of law after years of conflict among rival mujahedeen. Animated by frustrations with a Tajik-dominated government viewed as both corrupt and anti-Pashtun, Talibs seized the capital, Kabul, in 1996.<sup>46</sup>

They are trying to do so again, and the Western-backed government in Kabul, many believe, remains the insurgents' most effective recruiter. A 2013 survey of Afghans found corruption second only to chronic insecurity as the most frequently cited national challenge.<sup>47</sup> According to Pashtun shura leaders in Lashkar Gah, bribery is a necessary part of accessing government services: getting their children a seat in school, for example, or accessing the formal courts, the *Huquq*.<sup>48</sup> Even those who are no friends to the insurgents see national security forces as, at best, morally equivalent.

"Troubled young men go in one of two directions," said one shura leader. "They either join the police or the Taliban."

"Troubled young men go in one of two directions," said one shura leader.  
"They either join the police or the Taliban."

41 Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, "Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War," *American Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 2 (April 2008).

42 Beza Tesfaye and Rebecca Wolfe, *Why Youth Fight: Making Sense of Political Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Portland: Mercy Corps, 2014).

43 DFID, *Youth Voices on a Post-2015 World* (London: DFID/CSO Youth Working Group, 2013).

44 Transparency International, "Corruption Perceptions Index," <http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2012/results>.

45 Chatham House, "Somalia's Transition: What Role for Sub-National Entities?" (meeting report, January 2012).

46 Zachary Laub, "The Taliban in Afghanistan," Council on Foreign Relations, July 4, 2014.

47 There have been efforts to address this epidemic. Former President Karzai issued Presidential Decree Number 45 in July 2012, which emphasized administrative and justice reforms, and anti-corruption measures, but the decree has been difficult to implement.

48 For more, see United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Corruption in Afghanistan: Recent Patterns and Trends* (UNODC, December 2012).

This moral equivalency has, for a long time, extended to the use of children in war. Afghanistan was listed on the U.N. Secretary-General's "list of shame" for recruiting children into its national security forces.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, while the Colombian military forces stopped openly recruiting children in 2000, abuses continue:<sup>50</sup> Reports of civilian killings, lengthy detentions, using underage prisoners for intelligence gathering, and occasional alliances with right-wing paramilitaries all deeply tarnish the reputation of the state.<sup>51</sup>

## Lawless Spaces

Where the formal society disappoints, violent groups often enjoy the means to offer a substitute. The "new wars" literature suggests that globalization, with its growing opportunities for licit and illicit commerce, undermines fragile states at the same time it provides armed groups with new opportunities to construct alternative political and economic spheres.<sup>52</sup> Afghanistan's lively opium trade, for instance, helps bankroll the Islamists who are now, in many areas, eclipsing the state.

Stateless and politically vulnerable areas enable armed groups to engage in their own perverse campaigns to win hearts and minds. Last year, in Barawe, a town in Somalia's Lower Shabelle region, the Islamists opened a center for neglected youth. According to al-Shabab's Sheikh Mohamed Abu Abdalla, who acts as governor of the Lower Shabelle, the goal of the center is to "rehabilitate" children, offer religious education and encourage youth to join the war against the evils originating in Mogadishu. The center advertised "fun days" for young people. In the pictures al-Shabab released, youth wearing the group's white headband played games: potato sack jumping races and walking with eggs balanced on spoons held in their mouths. Elders wearing keffiyeh and an al-Shabab fighter in camouflage, a rifle slung over his shoulder, looked on.<sup>53</sup>

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49 Patricia Gossman, "Afghanistan's Endorsement of UN Pact Can Get it Off the Child Soldier 'List of Shame,'" GlobalPost, September 6, 2014.

50 Ban Ki-moon, *Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General* (New York: United Nations General Assembly, Security Council, 2012).

51 Amnesty International, *Annual Report: Colombia 2013*, <http://www.amnestyusa.org/research/reports/annual-report-colombia-2013?page=show>.

52 Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security* (London: Zed Books, 2001);

Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambanis, *Understanding Civil War* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2005).

53 Tres Thomas, "Al-Shabaab Opens Center for Disadvantaged Youth," Somalia Newsroom, July 2, 2014, <http://somalianewsroom.com/2014/07/02/al-shabaab-opens-center-for-disadvantaged-youth-2/>.

## Colombia

Though a middle-income country, Colombia has been embroiled in civil war since 1964.

A weak state, deep inequality and a persistent rural-urban divide have enabled armed groups to gain footholds throughout many parts of the country.

This map indicates those states where youth recruitment by armed groups is most pervasive.

1. Atlantico
2. Magdalena
3. North de Santander
4. Cundinamarca
5. Risaralda
6. Quindio
7. Distrito Capital
8. Valle del Cauca

Even in Colombia, an upper-middle-income country,<sup>54</sup> the central government suffers from a short reach. The city center of Bogota – with its tidy squares, European automobiles and craft beers – is a world away from the lonely, impoverished villages of the hinterlands. A 2013 estimate suggests there are as many as 16,000 child soldiers in Colombia.<sup>55</sup> Indigenous and Afro-Colombian youth in rural communities – places where government services are virtually nonexistent – appear to be at particular risk. Well-heeled insurgents, enriched by the drug trade, are in many cases the only game in town. The high price of coca pays for guns, uniforms and motorcycles.<sup>56</sup> For boys in particular, these are a powerful draw.<sup>57</sup>



A young person wants to be somebody, but opportunities are often few and far between. In societies where traditional notions of manhood are hobbled – where young men lack the chance to become respected adults in their communities – violent groups may provide a different way of expressing their masculinity.<sup>58</sup> Gender can be militarized for women, as well.<sup>59</sup> Left-wing insurgencies appeal to them by

54 See World Bank data: <http://data.worldbank.org/country/colombia>.

55 Juan Forero, "Years of Combat Experience, And Just Turning 20," NPR, May 30, 2013.

56 According to an estimate cited by the Council on Foreign Relations in 2009, the FARC took in somewhere between USD 500 million and USD 600 million annually from the illegal drug trade. See Stephanie Hanson, "FARC, ELN: Colombia's Left-Wing Guerrillas," Council on Foreign Relations, 2009.

57 Defensoria del Pueblo, *Caracterización de los niños, niñas y adolescentes desvinculados de los grupos armados ilegales: Inserción social y productiva desde un enfoque de derechos humanos* (Bogota: Defensoria del Pueblo, 2006).

58 This has also been observed in South Africa. See Dianne Jeffthas and Lillian Artz, "Youth Violence: A Gendered Perspective," in *Someone Stole My Smile: An Exploration into the Causes of Youth Violence in South Africa*, ed. Patrick Burton (Cape Town, South Africa: Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention, 2007), 37-56.

59 For more on the militarization of gender, see Dyan Mazurana and Keith Proctor, "Gender, Conflict and Peace" (occasional paper, World Peace Foundation, Tufts University, October 15, 2013).



Colombia – Miguel Samper for Mercy Corps

promising equality and the opportunity to be taken seriously.<sup>60</sup> “I wanted to be a machinista,” said Isabel, a former child soldier. “I hate chauvinism. Many women think this way.”

**Mercy Corps’ income-generation specialist Carlos Ramirez teaches basic economics to youth in a transitional home for demobilized child soldiers in Cali.**

For the angry young person seeking an outlet or escape, the insurgent is nearby, in many cases a neighbor or family member. During interviews with former Afghan insurgents, one older man, sickened by government corruption, went to join the Islamists – and took his son with him. In Afghanistan, the IEA occasionally works through traditional tribal shuras and jirgas, interweaving with local institutions. In a survey of former child soldiers in Colombia, the most popular reason a young person cited for joining one of the country’s acronym-laden armed groups over another was proximity: The guerrillas lived near the community and were present in the schools. Ideology was secondary.<sup>61</sup>

It matters where you live. According to a 2010 study, the use of child soldiers is driven less by demand than supply. Places where children are unprotected,<sup>62</sup> such as IDP camps and schools, provide insurgents a concentrated pool of recruits.<sup>63</sup> In Somalia, recruitment to al-Shabab has been facilitated by the radicalization of religious and educational institutions.

60 Mazurana and Proctor.

61 Defensoria del Pueblo.

62 Vera Achvarina and Simon Reich, “No Place to Hide: Refugees, Displaced Persons, and Child Soldier Recruits,” in *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, ed. Scott Gates and Simon Reich (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 55-76.

63 Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *Global Report 2008* (London: Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008).

## 'A Marketplace of Ideas': Narratives of Violence

"When the Salafis started supplying local schools with history books, it changed young people's view of the world," Maryam Abdillahi Hassan said. Maryam is a researcher at the Puntland Development Research Center (PDRC), a think tank in northern Somalia. She is only 23.

"A school is a marketplace of ideas," she said. "And now people talk all the time about Israel and Palestine. From listening to them, you'd think Muslims are oppressed and the only option is to fight."

Maryam grew up in Galkayo, a large commercial city in north-central Somalia, where al-Shabab has for years been battling to gain control. A well-educated Somali, her English is quick and accompanied by constant gestures: long hands rolling on slender wrists.

"Now we don't have non-Muslims," she said. "We're not as tolerant."

The rise of Salafism – a radical interpretation of Quranic text and traditions – has gradually supplanted, in many places, the more moderate Sufi practices of the Qadiriyya and Ahmadiyya orders. Money from the Gulf States funded Salafi schools, scholarships and businesses.

The shift in Somalia's religious complexion has, in recent years, been accelerated through the serial intimidation of moderate Islamic voices and the high-profile assassination of more liberal clerics.

"Women don't feel as safe alone," Maryam said. The radicalization of Islam, layering over long-standing cultural practices such as female genital mutilation, has intensified the plight of young Somali women. Last year, at a girls education program founded by Mercy Corps, boys stood outside and threw rocks at the windows.

"Boys are learning that girls shouldn't be in school," she said. "And mosques and schools have become recruiting grounds for al-Shabab."

Schools, as places of religious indoctrination, are an under-studied phenomenon in Somalia, but experts at the PDRC have called for a standardization of school curricula to prevent radicalization of schoolchildren. Where progressive voices cede educational institutions to armed groups, they lose the opportunity to shape narratives and attitudes, or to provide a compelling source of meaning.

In Somalia, Salafism gained traction among the youth because it was seen as a path to prestige and belonging. According to Maryam, there was a sense that Sufism was old-fashioned, hidebound. Salafism, by contrast, was seen by many as the more "modern" option.

We sat in a guesthouse a stone's throw from the childhood home of Ahmed Abdi Godane: the al-Shabab emir killed by a U.S. airstrike in September.

While sustained military pressure has rocked the insurgents back on their heels, they have evolved in the face of the Western-backed advance, becoming a leaner, more mobile and more radical operation,

**"I want to be a teacher because education is key to life. I want to teach to make an impact in my community."**

**Badra Cabdi Cali (right), age 20, at Bomoud University in Somalia**



complicating hopes that a military strategy will rid the Horn of the movement.<sup>64</sup>

“Al-Shabab became powerful here because they were able to tap into people’s frustrations,” Maryam said. She rejected the idea that the group could be simply rooted out by bullets and drones.

“Al-Shabab is just a symptom of larger problems.”

## A Symptom of Larger Problems

Increasingly, the academic literature sees the decision to engage in political violence as an interplay of push and pull factors. While armed groups offer an “out” – a way to escape or avenge the frustrations of normal society – they also offer purpose, dignity, a sense of belonging and prestige.<sup>65</sup> Often, some trigger event catalyzes the decision to join.<sup>66</sup> The bombing of Nasir’s madrassa, for example. In Colombia, a 12-year-old girl fled her family and into the arms of the guerrillas when she learned her mother was planning to sell her. Such events sharply focus long-standing frustrations.

In many conflict-prone places, the most consistent drivers of conflict appear to be sourced in a state that is weak, venal or violent. Or all three.

The challenges haunting such places elude easy solutions, but then most development efforts seek only to address symptoms, rather than the source. Absent meaningful governance reform, improved security and the creation of meaningful opportunities for young people, programs and peace processes can only do so much. While negotiations between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) – the oldest insurgency in the world, and Colombia’s largest – continue in Havana, the risk factors that prodded many young people into violence will persist regardless of whether a treaty is signed.

Countering narratives of grievance, along with offering a better vision of the future, is the job of development, but how to do it befuddles many experts.

“How do you build a Colombian state after years of normalized violence?” wondered Claudia Viviana, a senior official in Colombia’s Ministry of the Interior. In Colombia, the ministry oversees government agencies responsible for the reintegration of former insurgents.

Fifty years’ of conflict echoes everywhere. In rural Colombia, violence is routine and self-perpetuating, depressing development and disrupting access to education. Many child soldiers have run away from parental abuse or sexual violence. Some join to escape the numbing boredom of the village, or they go seeking revenge. There are 6 million conflict victims in Colombia. Five million were internally displaced persons (IDPs) at one point or another, well over one-tenth of the total population.<sup>67</sup>

“We are trying to prevent the growth of conflict in a society that is rooted in conflict,” Claudia said.

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64 Matt Bryden, *The Reinvention of Al-Shabaab: A Strategy of Choice or Necessity?* (Washington: CSIS, 2014).

65 For supporting examples from the gang culture in the U.S., see James C. Howell, “Menacing or Mimicking? Realities of Youth Gangs,” *Juvenile and Family Court Journal* 58, no. 2 (Spring 2007).

66 OECD, *Reducing the Involvement of Youth in Armed Violence: Programming Note* (New York: OECD, 2011).

67 Human Rights Watch, “Colombia: Country Summary,” January 2014, [http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related\\_material/colombia\\_9.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related_material/colombia_9.pdf).





Colombia – Miguel Stamper for Mercy Corps

**Liliana Garcia, youth educator for Mercy Corps, works with demobilized child soldiers at a transitional home in Cali, Colombia. Mercy Corps' team offers twice-weekly sessions in income generation, relaxation and reflection, and sports to teach self-respect and teamwork.**

Even government-controlled reintegration centers are nested in insecurity. The Don Bosco Center in Cali, where many former child soldiers live and go to school, is situated in the Agua Blanca neighborhood, one of the city's most dangerous. Drug-running gangs have carved up the city blocks into feudal domains. Simmering *détentes* routinely explode into violence. The gangs, eager for new recruits, prey on disgruntled and demobilized former insurgents, offering money, guns and a

position of prestige. A peace deal between the government and the FARC will, many fear, exacerbate these problems: The 2006 demobilization of the Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), a right-wing paramilitary force, generated dozens of new criminal organizations and local drug syndicates that continue to terrorize the country.<sup>68</sup>


"We are potentially at the door of a demobilization process that is very big," Claudia said, referencing the potential peace deal with the FARC. But starved of technical expertise, she said the government badly needed support from international partners.

"The institutions we have are inadequate, and there is a gap between theory and policy," she said. "We're trying to address an immense social and political problem without making it worse."

68 Giselle Lopez. "The Colombian Civil War: Potential for Justice in a Culture of Violence," *Policy Briefing*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Spring (2011).

## CHAPTER III: **MAKING MATTERS WORSE**

Where drivers of violence are rooted in sociopolitical dynamics, familiar solutions are unlikely to do much good. In fact, they may be counterproductive. Vocational training programs not linked to meaningful employment risk raising false hopes, and where programs fail to reach the most marginalized, they may contribute to perceptions of unfairness.



Abdul Wali, age 18,  
participates in a carpentry  
class in Mercy Corps'  
INVEST program,  
Helmand province.

Even programs designed to address marginalization explicitly through youth empowerment run the risk of begetting conflict rather than containing it. In some contexts, civically engaged youth appear to be more supportive of political violence, not less.

“I worry a lot about raising expectations and creating false hope,” Ibrahim Al-Hussein said. “It is a very dangerous problem.”

Ibrahim is executive director of Adeso, an African development and charity organization that works in Somalia. Based in Kenya, Adeso provides education and economic development programs in partnership with beneficiary communities.

“You have to work at the grass roots,” Ibrahim said. “International aid can do a lot, but if it’s not carefully applied, it can create lots of problems.”

Training programs, he said, are some of the worst offenders. “They are separated from the local community,” he said. “They don’t take into account local needs. They are not designed in consultation with the local youth.”

These are common complaints. According to a senior program officer at Adam Smith International (ASI), which implements a range of economic development programs in Somalia, most skills training programs are ill-informed and supply-driven. Market assessments are infrequent, or poorly done. A lack of coordination among NGOs, donors and governments results in programs that are duplicated, potentially many times over. Too often programs are driven by a desire to be fashionable. For example, with the security situation improving in Somalia’s capital, he said, “everybody wants to be in Mogadishu.” But the infusion of new players who offer skills training is glutting the local economy, smothering private sector initiatives and creating far more skilled graduates than there are available jobs.

“You have to work at the grass roots,” Ibrahim said. “International aid can do a lot, but if it’s not carefully applied, it can create lots of problems.”

## The ‘Employability’ Distinction

Admittedly, most vocational training programs do not aim to actually create jobs (in fact, the evidence that they do is quite limited).<sup>69</sup> Rather, in the anodyne language of development, they seek to boost “employability” by supplying vocational and skills trainings. But where demand for skilled workers does not rise in tandem with the increase in supply, such programs, in the words of one scholar, “serve as waiting rooms, not launching pads.”<sup>70</sup>

The Garowe Vocational Training Center (GVTC) in northern Somalia may be emblematic. A range of development actors support the center’s classes in mechanics and tailoring. New graduates of these programs generally self-describe as optimistic. But speak to graduates one to two years out, and some

69 For example, see Valeria Izzi, “Just Keeping Them Busy? Youth Employment Projects as a Peacebuilding Tool,” *International Development Planning Review* 35, no. 2 (2013): 103-117.

70 S.F. Hamilton, “Social Roles for Youth: Interventions in Unemployment,” in *Youth Unemployment and Society*, ed. A.C. Peterson and J.T. Mortimer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 248-269, cited in Izzi, 103-117.

have soured. According to a young man who graduated from a mechanics course in early 2013, there were 22 students in his class. Two found employment. A young woman who received training to produce “tie-and-dye” clothing exited the program almost two years ago. Of her 25-student cohort, she said, one found a job.

An official with the Puntland regional government condemned the failures: “It’s like giving someone a glass to drink, but there’s no water.”

Where skills programs do not deliver, they may contribute to youth frustration. Hopes are raised, and then dashed. Expectations matter. One theory behind the restlessness of many Arab youth is not simply that they are unemployed, but that widespread education raised their expectations about the future. What may be important is not so much what people have, but the gap between what people get and what they expected.<sup>71</sup>

The opportunities provided to young people must be meaningful. In Colombia, some fear the focus on vocational training for child soldiers will lock them out of the fast-developing formal economy. One longtime NGO staffer worried that the current emphasis may create a “permanent underclass of former insurgents.” As one example, in Cali, a private sector actor initiated an employment program for former insurgents, but the jobs turned out to be janitorial. While such employment may, technically, tick the box, it risks inflaming the old frustrations of demobilized youth. They will have plenty of time to muse on social injustice while pushing mops and cleaning toilets.

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An official with the Puntland regional government condemned the failures: “It’s like giving someone a glass to drink, but there’s no water.”

## Build It and They Will Come: Challenges of Targeting

Development programs cannot reach everyone, so there must be some rationale for who is reached, and why. For donors and NGOs, marginalized youth are a rhetorical priority,<sup>72</sup> but in many cases, selection criteria are poorly defined or weakly enforced. Bad intelligence contributes: In many instances, development actors don’t know who the poor or marginalized youth are, or where they live. There is a “build and they will come” mentality: Many youth programs are advertised by word of mouth or by community center postings that illiterate youth can’t read. As Mercy Corps has observed, many conflict prevention efforts generally fall short when it comes to reaching the right beneficiaries: The tendency is to engage the easiest to reach.<sup>73</sup> It is simpler to train urban English speakers, for example, than village youth who speak only the local tongue.

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71 This is the central insight in Davies’ “J-curve” theory of revolution. See James Davies, “Toward a Theory of Revolution,” *American Sociological Review* 27, no. 1, (1962): 5-19.

72 For example, see DFID, *Youth Participation in Development: A Guide for Development Agencies and Policy Makers* (London: DFID, 2010); USAID, *Youth and Conflict: A Toolkit for Intervention* (Washington: USAID, 2005).

73 Mercy Corps, *Youth as Agents of Positive Change: Recommendations for Advancing U.S. Efforts to Empower Youth and Foster Stability* (Portland: Mercy Corps, 2014).

But there are consequences to grasping low-hanging fruit. Where programs privilege certain groups of youth at the expense of others, they risk exacerbating youth frustrations, further marginalizing the underprivileged and, potentially, begetting conflict.<sup>74</sup> In transitional states, the development enterprise can become just another example of routine unfairness.

“All the NGOs around here belong to one or other of the clans,” said one cynical youth outside Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland. “The sons of the leaders get the programs. People like me don’t get anything.”

This problem is particularly evident where NGOs hand off selection responsibilities to local elites. In Hargeisa, a business startup grants program appeared to have been hijacked by village leaders: The recipients were well-connected young males who already owned shops in the local bazaar, each selling the same goods – razors, soda, cigarettes – within steps of one another. The distance from one shop to the next was less than 40 meters.

Funding relatively established, well-connected young businessmen, who directly compete with one another in the local market – rather than helping new entrepreneurs with novel products or services – seems a poor way to create meaningful opportunities for young people or spur private sector growth. Worse, it contributes to a sense that programs are not for anyone but the elite.

## The Voiceless Majority: Civic Engagement Programs

As a panacea to marginalization, empowerment strategies are a staple in youth programs. Mercy Corps is no outlier. Empowerment lies at the center of our youth strategy: If young people are engaged socially, economically and peacefully, they will be better positioned to lead secure and productive lives.

As part of SYLI, Mercy Corps implemented its Global Citizens Corps (GCC) curriculum in Somalia. During a 10-day program, we trained youth leaders in community mobilization, networking and leadership. Following completion of the program, graduates formed civil society groups. They were encouraged to engage in youth dialogues and community service and to initiate advocacy campaigns. SYLI has so far trained 238 young leaders, who subsequently organized 23 youth-led community service events, and six sporting events intended to raise “youth awareness.” According to a USAID midterm evaluation, 13,850 youth attended these events.<sup>75</sup>

These are laudable achievements. But there’s just one problem: They do not appear to contribute to stability. **According to Mercy Corps’ baseline data of youth participants in Somalia, youth who are more civically engaged are more likely to have engaged in political violence, not less.** In general, we have found that civic engagement has, at best, no effect. Among Arab youth, Mercy Corps’ research found that attitudes toward political violence were not influenced, one way or the other, by political engagement.<sup>76</sup>

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74 Izzi, 111.

75 Mercy Corps, 2013.

76 Jon Kurtz and Ricardo L. Gomez, “Civic Engagement of Youth in the Middle East and North Africa: An Analysis of Key Drivers and Outcomes,” in *Islam and Democracy: Perspectives on the Arab Spring*, ed. Aylin Unver Noi (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

We have not had anything like the Arab Spring in Somalia because we're not organized," he said. "But we're getting there."

Upon reflection, it's not hard to see why this might be. Youth leaders tend to be more assertive and politically conscious than their peers. Where injustices are apparent, they are less likely to sit on their hands.

This seems hardly a bad thing. Young people are vital to the future of their societies, and to reforming sclerotic political institutions. But civic engagement programs, isolated from meaningful governance reforms, are unlikely to mitigate political violence. Indeed, such programs may be priming a confrontation.

Traditional elites, in many places, will be unenthused about youthful "troublemakers" issuing demands, and lobbying for positions of responsibility, or improvements in youth services. Where existing political institutions lack the capacity – or the will – to incorporate new voices, youth empowerment may result in expectations outpacing changes in the status quo. Dissatisfied youth may seek alternative methods to express their frustration.

In Somaliland, a group of Mercy Corps' GCC graduates sat in the offices of our implementing partner, the Somaliland National Youth Organization (SONYO). Young men and women in their twenties, the graduates praised SYLI. It was an important program, they said. "It helped me find my voice," said a young woman. Many, however, were frustrated. Ossified political institutions – dominated by clan elders – were failing to integrate youth.

"Young people are very angry," said Hasan, 23, a youth leader in a village outside Hargeisa. Hasan again thanked Mercy Corps and SONYO for giving him the tools to advocate for youth, but in the same breath he condemned the clan-dominated political structure.

We have not had anything like the Arab Spring in Somalia because we're not organized," he said.

"But we're getting there."

Fatima is 18 and a graduate of the Garowe Vocational Training Center (GVTC) in Puntland, where she took a course in office management. She graduated in June 2013 and so far has been unable to find a job. Though optimistic for the future, like many youth she is frustrated by routine unfairness and the influence of Somalia's clans. "Clanism exists everywhere in Somalia, and it drives unemployment," she said. "Because when a position opens up, it goes to the person with the right clan connections."



## CHAPTER IV: **FRAGILE STATES OF MIND**

Violence is learned young, and development programs need to be tailored to the life experiences and beliefs of the youth they hope to impact. Countering narratives of violence requires modeling positive behavior, creating “goal-setting” programs to help young people imagine a positive future and, importantly, exposing young people to different points of view. This may prove particularly difficult in communities where there is a consensus of frustration.

Adriana Loiza, 21, joined the National Liberation Army, one of Colombia’s strongest rebel groups, when she was just 11 years old. She climbed the ranks – serving as second-in-command of a company of 300 fighters – before being captured just short of her 18th birthday.



Adriana doesn't remember how many people she killed.

Just a few years ago she was a guerrilla in the National Liberation Army (ELN), a communist insurgency group and U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization. The ELN has accumulated a laundry list of violent crimes: mass kidnapping, assassination, widespread extortion, bombing campaigns against multinational and domestic oil companies, drug running<sup>77</sup> – not to mention ongoing attempts to overthrow the Colombian state.

“When I think about who I was then, it's hard to believe,” Adriana said. “It's like I was a different person. I was so young. I cared only about fighting.”

While the “angry young man” rioting outside an embassy, burning tires and marching in columns is an image popularized in the press and, to a large degree, in the development literature,<sup>78</sup> girls make up 20 to 30 percent of Colombia's child soldiers.<sup>79</sup> Colombia is not alone. Globally, thousands of young women have been active members of paramilitary organizations in 59 countries.<sup>80</sup>

Shortly before her fifth-grade graduation, Adriana sought out the local ELN commander, pleading to join the front after right-wing paramilitaries killed her parents. She wanted vengeance. But she was small for her age, and the ELN turned her away. Adriana persisted, showing up again and again at the camp until the commander, worn down, relented. He outfitted her in a baggy uniform and oversized boots.

“I had to stuff them with newspapers so they would fit,” she recalled. “The others saw me and laughed.”

In the ELN, she excelled, rising to second-in-command of 300 fighters. She routinely engaged the paramilitary group responsible for her parents' deaths. “When I fought there was a lot of adrenaline,” she said. “Did it feel good? Maybe yes. It was something strange.”

“At the time I only liked to fight, and I always got the best results,” she said. At a table in an abandoned restaurant, she sat low in the chair – she's still small – her fingers threaded around a glass of water.

“We killed very many paramilitaries.”

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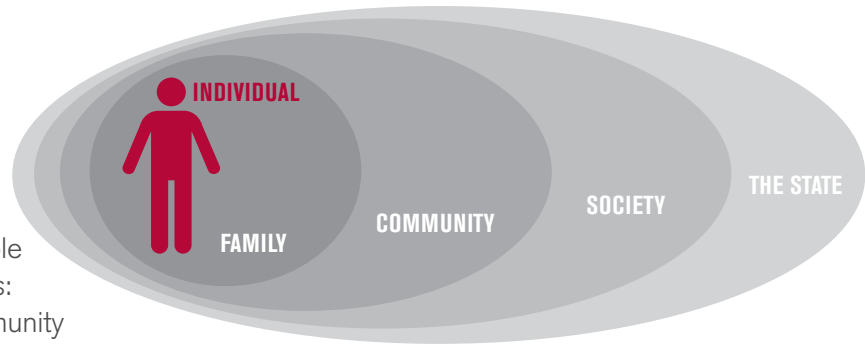
77 In recent years, the ELN's primary income appears to come from drug trafficking, a shift from the protection payments of the 1980s and the kidnappings of the 1990s. Increased activity on the Pacific coast and the Venezuelan border, occurring around 2005 to 2007, coincided with this shift. See Hanson.

78 Marc Sommers, *Youth and Conflict: A Brief Review of Available Literature*, (Washington, D.C.: USAID, 2006).

79 Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, “Organizing Minors: The Case of Colombia,” in *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, ed. Scott Gates and Simon Reich (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 121-140; E. Lindegren, “Fighting the Liminal Line: Female Child Soldiers in Colombia: Women or Children?” *Righting Wrongs: A Journal of Human Rights* 1, no. 1 (2011): 37-54.

80 Mazurana and Proctor.

## A Systems Approach to Youth Programs .....



In their day-to-day lives, young people move through multiple environments: family, school, work, the larger community and so on. Development programs, to be effective, should be tailored to touch on as many of these worlds as possible.

Source: Alliance for International Youth Development (AIYD), InterAction.

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## Mending Minds and Systems

Violence is learned young. From puberty through early adulthood, people are particularly impressionable, undergoing the rocky process of cultivating an individual identity and a political self.<sup>81</sup> It is a time of acute vulnerability. Beginning at roughly age 11, the prefrontal cortex undergoes a dramatic reorganization, and during this period of development – which lasts until about 18 – the brain is extremely vulnerable. Trauma, abuse, violence and neglect have lasting impacts on the brain and can significantly affect neurological function, limiting “future choices and opportunities.”<sup>82</sup>

Mercy Corps has identified adolescence – ages 12 to 19 – as a vital time to reach youth before violent behavioral norms are established.<sup>83</sup> It is no coincidence that the IEA's ranks are filled with boys.<sup>84</sup> Or that two-thirds of al-Shabab's members join between the ages of 15 and 24.<sup>85</sup> In Colombia, the average age of a young person joining the ELN or the FARC is between 12 and 13.<sup>86</sup>

Preparing young people for positive roles in their families and communities is critical to peace and development. For youth programs to discourage political violence, they must provide a meaningful alternative: what USAID terms a “positive pull.”

Youth are not simply passive victims of war, but tough, adaptable actors. Ignoring their capacity constitutes a lost opportunity.<sup>87</sup> But learning how to best channel and engage those talents, which insurgent commanders are savvy at manipulating, is a challenge. It requires moving beyond the simple provision of trauma-based services to expanding the local capacity of youth and their communities.<sup>88</sup>

In program parlance, this community emphasis informs the “systems approach.” Because youth move through different contexts – family life, school, work, their peers, leisure – programs seek to positively

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81 D.O. Sears and S. Levy, “Childhood and Adult Political Development,” in *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, ed. D.O. Sears, L. Huddy and R. Jervis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Dahlberg.

82 UNICEF, *Adolescence: A Time that Matters* (New York: UNICEF, 2002).

83 Mercy Corps, *Why Mercy Corps Works With Youth* (Portland: Mercy Corps, 2014).

84 Mark Silinsky, *The Taliban: Afghanistan's Most Lethal Insurgents* (Santa Barbara: Praeger Security International, 2014).

85 Anneli Botha and Mahdi Abdile, *Radicalisation and al-Shabaab Recruitment in Somalia* (ISS Paper 266, Institute for Security Studies, September 2014).

86 While certainly a number of these were acts of forced recruitment, the same study found that the vast majority of respondents self-described as joining voluntarily: 85.4 percent for the FARC, and 89.9 percent for the ELN. See Defensoria del Pueblo.

87 B.K. Barber, *Adolescents and War: How Youth Deal with Political Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

88 UNICEF, *Inter-Agency Guide to the Evaluation of Psychosocial Programming in Emergencies* (New York: UNICEF, 2011).

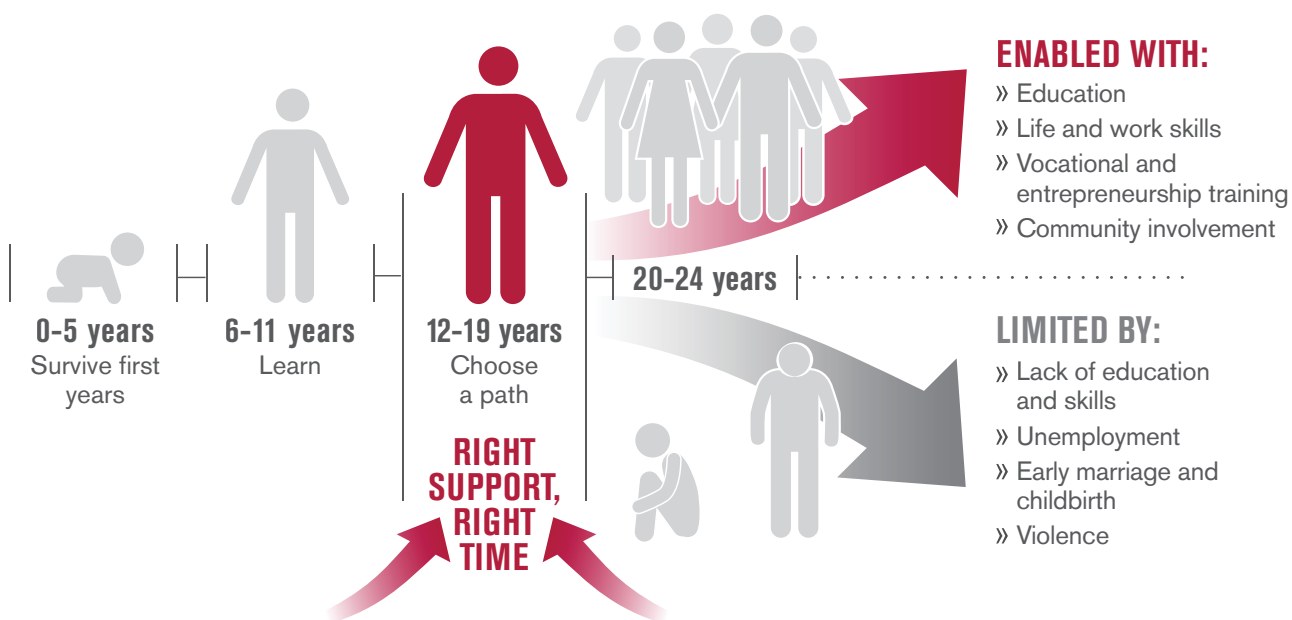
shape a young person’s interactions across those worlds. “Systems” diagrams resemble an onion: A young person is surrounded by “layers” of family, community and society.<sup>89</sup>

In Colombia, Mercy Corps’ prevention and reintegration programs have provided traditional and alternative psychosocial support to individual youth, and those are paired with after-school protection programs (to keep children away from armed groups), community engagement, and positive parenting classes. These efforts are nested in a wider attempt to build government capacity to promote child welfare, along with promoting the adoption of family and child welfare policies at the local and national level.

Where societies fail to integrate youth in meaningful ways, young people are more likely to engage in political violence. This is particularly apparent in war-wracked societies, where time-honored methods for initiating young people have decayed.<sup>90</sup> Too many young people, for a host of social and economic reasons, are unable to transition. Rather, they languish in an interstitial stage of non-adulthood. Modeling new behaviors contributes to more peaceful and productive youth, but the cultural environment, and prevailing political narratives, complicates the attempt.

## Mercy Corps’ Focus on Adolescents .....

Mercy Corps has found that integrated, systems approaches to youth programs in conflict-prone states can dissuade young people from joining armed groups. However, successful interventions must be tailored to context and local drivers of conflict – and they must be developed in partnership with local youth.



89 Alliance for International Youth, *AIYD Guiding Principles for International Youth Development* (Washington D.C.: Interaction, 2013).

90 For a discussion of this in Cambodia and Guatemala, see Sabine Kurtenbach, *Conceptual Considerations on Continuity and Change of Violence*, Project Working Paper No. 1, *Social and Political Fractures After Wars: Youth Violence in Cambodia and Guatemala* (Duisberg, Germany: Institute for Development and Peace, 2008).

## All About Who You Know: Social Connections and the Peace Dividend

“It is very remarkable everything that has happened to me,” said Abdullah Alim, a young Afghan man and an INVEST graduate. “The most important benefit has been joining the community.”

Once, Abdullah was a poppy farmer. Afghanistan produces 90 percent of the world’s poppy, and the illicit crop funds Islamist insurgents. Attempts to stamp out poppy production have foundered, but some farmers may be peacefully persuaded to find other lines of work. Today, Abdullah is a motorcycle mechanic with his own shop in Lashkar Gah, the bustling capital of Helmand province.

Behind him were stacks of coiled belts, a tin full of screws and bottles of hydraulic oil. From the other side of a barrel, a boy shyly watched. “Now I can provide a good life for my son,” Abdullah said. “And he can get an education and grow up with other children.”

“When I grew poppy, I could make money,” he said, “but you are out there in the countryside, it is dangerous and you’re alone, and you want to be part of the community.”

We tend to assume there is a peace dividend that comes with growing social connections. Generally speaking, when young people feel respected within the community, and enjoy a higher perceived social standing, they may be less likely to support political violence.

But not all social connections are equal. In fact, Mercy Corps’ research in Afghanistan found that having more social connections actually increased support for political violence. If there is a community consensus on social frustrations, then expanding one’s social circle within that community is unlikely to lead to more peaceful youth. More social connections may simply reinforce attitudes.

In Pashtun communities in southern Afghanistan, for instance, ethnically driven frustrations with the central government are commonplace and reinforced by resentments over foreign occupation. There are few voices to counter popular narratives of grievance.

Abdullah’s face darkened at the mention of Kabul. At the time of our interview last summer, the outcome of the presidential election was uncertain. “It is for Allah to decide what happens,” he said. “But if the government is to be successful, they need to do more for the people. Otherwise, the insurgency will continue.”

Countering violent social narratives requires building bridges between different communities. According to Mercy Corps’ research, growing social connections between groups – by promoting commercial connections and dialogues – reduces support for political violence. It is not the quantity of social interactions that matter, but the type.

## ‘From One World to the Next’: Integrated Approaches

On a hillside overlooking downtown Cali, the busy metropolitan center in western Colombia, sits the Hogar Claret transitory home. For former child soldiers, government-run homes are the first stop on a years-long reintegration process that is intended to socialize them, provide educational and financial support, and, ultimately, bring them back into the fold as peaceful, productive citizens. Hogar Claret’s wall rises high above the street. Ring the bell and up above a small dark head peeks over and calls out: “Hola?” Security is tight. Child assassins, dispatched by vengeful insurgent commanders, have tried to infiltrate the home and kill wayward fighters.

Life in the transitory home is highly structured. Former fighters rise at 4 a.m., have a full day of supervised activities – support groups and counseling sessions, yoga and meditation, formal education classes – and go to bed every night at 8 p.m. For games, they organize into units. There is a ranking system: If you perform well, you climb the rungs, earning rewards and prestige. Youth who mess up risk demotion. In its regimentation, and emphasis on group solidarity, life in the transitory home mirrors life in the insurgency. Even the sleeping hours are the same.

Experienced psychosocial and educational professionals staff the home. With support from the European Commission, Mercy Corps implemented reintegration programs for former child soldiers at Hogar Claret. Employing social workers and psychosocial professionals, Mercy Corps helped traumatized fighters craft an identity independent of their armed past. “Second chance” programs aim to grow new skills and provide new ways to feel safe. Support groups and “big brother, big sister” mentorship programs work to broaden social networks and counter narratives of violence.<sup>91</sup>

Such programs also provide practical skills. Former insurgents, who have lived in the jungle for 10 or 15 years, are often unfamiliar with city life or amenities, never having negotiated rent or walked the aisles of a supermarket. They have never held down a job or, for that matter, prepared a resume or sat for an interview. Mercy Corps developed a maleta de transicion (“transition suitcase”) program that provided basic social tools. According to a program officer with the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF), the reintegration agency, the risk of “reincidence” – in other words, returning to an armed group – is highest during moments of transition. “Many former fighters experience a shock when they move from one world to the next,” the officer said.

According to Mercy Corps’ research, growing social connections between groups – by promoting commercial connections and dialogues – reduces support for political violence. It is not the quantity of social interactions that matter, but the type.

91 Mercy Corps, *Why Mercy Corps Works With Youth*.

## ‘I Have to Remember My Breathing Exercises’: Supporting Psychosocial Transitions

A persistent challenge for psychosocial programs is meaningful evaluation. How do we know when they are effective? Are observed effects a consequence of the program, or something else? Will observed effects last? As UNICEF has argued, psychosocial programs would benefit from long-term, ongoing research. In development-speak, this means a move from outcome evaluations, which provide a snapshot at the end of the program, to impact evaluations, which are intended to identify lasting change.<sup>92</sup> Resource shortages bedevil such efforts: Too rarely is there a budget for research that extends beyond the program’s time horizon, or for control groups that would allow researchers to compare beneficiaries to non-beneficiaries.

Partly as a consequence, donor support for counseling and social work programs may be limited. “Psychosocial programs are considered ‘too soft,’” said one USAID staffer, a youth specialist in Washington, D.C. “And the impacts are difficult to quantify, so they tend to get less funding.”

According to the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), international support for Colombia health programs – which includes psychosocial efforts – languishes. Of the total assessed need, 8 percent has been funded, as of September. Protection lags even farther behind at 4 percent.<sup>93</sup>

If the benefits of these investments are difficult to measure, they are, at places such as Hogar Claret, everywhere apparent: in the attentive, courteous former soldiers setting the table for lunch, or sitting in a circle on the patio discussing the challenges of the day with their support group. These programs emphasize a “life project”: helping young people define a set of ambitions and goals that can help them chart a peaceful path. It is painstaking work that will continue long after the youth leave Hogar Claret.

“It is a constant effort,” Jasmine said. A former child soldier, today she is a short-order cook. Someday, she hopes to open her own restaurant, but for now Jasmine labors in a tight, hot kitchen, turning strip steak on a grill. French fries sizzle in oil. “When my boss is yelling at me and the kitchen knives are right there,” she trailed off, and then laughed. “I have to remember my breathing exercises” – a reference to Hogar Claret’s yoga and meditation programs – “but it is not easy.”

After passing through Hogar Claret, Jasmine took cooking classes through a reintegration program, which helped place her in a first job. Although vocational training may not have a seminal impact on youth violence in isolation, helping young people complete their educations, become adults and find meaningful work can be an important part of assisting their transition.

**A transitional home for demobilized child soldiers in Cali, Colombia. Mercy Corps’ team offered twice-weekly sessions in income generation, relaxation and reflection, and Vivo Jugando, a sports-based curriculum that teaches self-respect and teamwork.**

<sup>92</sup> UNICEF, 2011.

<sup>93</sup> OCHA, *Colombia: Humanitarian Dashboard* (as of September 30, 2014).

“Learning a trade is an important part of becoming a peaceful adult,” said Eduardo Aguirre Davila, a professor at the National University in Bogota and a specialist on child soldiers. “Young people want to study, find a job, start a family.”

“But that investment will only be meaningful after you have helped young people separate from the original trauma,” he said.

Where former child soldiers successfully transition, he said, they can become “transformational agents” in their communities.

Adriana, the former ELN commander, was captured by the Colombian army and enrolled in Mercy Corps’ program. It was a difficult transition. “I just cried and cried,” she said. Several times she tried to escape. But eventually she turned a corner.

After graduating from the reintegration programs, Adriana was hired by Mercy Corps, helping other demobilized soldiers re-enter society. Today she is a single mother in Cali. After funding for the Mercy Corps program ended, she found work with DirecTV and currently runs local maintenance operations. She oversees six employees – mostly men – making the improbable transition from left-wing insurgent to satellite TV middle management.

“I still see a lot of injustice,” she said. “I work in a place with clients who have a lot, who will do anything for one more peso. But now I’m a professional person, a mother and father both, a human being in society who has to accept inequality.”



Colombia – Miguel Samper for Mercy Corps

## CONCLUSION: **WHY ARE WE STILL GETTING IT WRONG?**

Some of the greatest constraints to successful programs are self-imposed. The architecture of development – how programs are funded, administered and, perhaps most importantly, designed – may be poorly suited to addressing the appeal of violent movements among youth.

Ariel Cuaro Goizaman, 19, is part of the singing trio *Sensación Positiva* from Colombia. He met his bandmates when they were all participants in a program for demobilized youth in Cali. One of their songs warns youth not to be enticed into joining the war.





In conflict-prone states, development efforts are often undercut by the political and security environment. Local hostility, insecurity, a deficit of trustworthy local partners – the challenges are manifold. Yet, even in these places, the best practices are evident in locally owned, demand-driven programs; targeted interventions that reach the most marginalized; and multifaceted approaches that mix psychosocial programming, protection, economic development and meaningful improvements in governance. But these have been part of the development discussion for a long time.

So why are we still getting it wrong?

Successful programs require long time horizons, flexibility, deep local engagement and a tolerance for risk.

## Computer Screens and Burn Rates

Many of the greatest constraints are self-imposed. The architecture of development – how programs are funded, administered and, perhaps most importantly, designed – may be poorly suited to addressing the appeal of violent movements among youth.

Doing youth development in conflict-prone states involves a high degree of uncertainty. Successful programs require long time horizons, flexibility, deep local engagement and a tolerance for risk.

Unfortunately, the trends seem to be running the other way. Donor staffs are confined to distant capitals or, in the case of Somalia, to Nairobi, Kenya. High donor staff turnover – a 12-month tour is the norm in high-risk countries – further complicate meaningful management of program funding. Citing personnel risks, staffers virtually never visit the programs they administer. As one USAID staffer put it, “We manage programs from a computer screen in the embassy compound.”

At the same time, some large donors – suffering budget and personnel cuts, and feeling pressure from politicians for results – seek to simplify program management, shifting toward fewer, bigger projects. It's easier to administer one \$50 million program than five \$10 million programs. This is particularly problematic in the U.S., where USAID is under constant pressure from Congress to spend down funding quickly and meet its “burn rate.” Donor staffs are pushed to disburse money quickly and in large amounts, locking donors and implementers into large-scale investments that may turn out to be ineffective.<sup>94</sup> These “burn rate” requirements distort incentives: Money released in a timely fashion is an indication of sound management and good development. In most instances, that does not appear to be the case. The impulse to move fast thwarts thoughtful, locally rooted programs. According to a senior aid worker in Kabul, “We'd prefer to have less money and more time.”

But time everywhere is in short supply. Programs are driven by three- to five-year windows. This is poorly suited to places wracked by long-standing violence. Where conflicts are generational in scope, and violence is widely normalized, it will likely take years to untie the knots.

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94 Daniel Aldrich, “Mightier than the Sword: Social Science and Development in Countering Violent Extremism,” in *Frontiers in Development* (Washington D.C.: USAID, 2012).

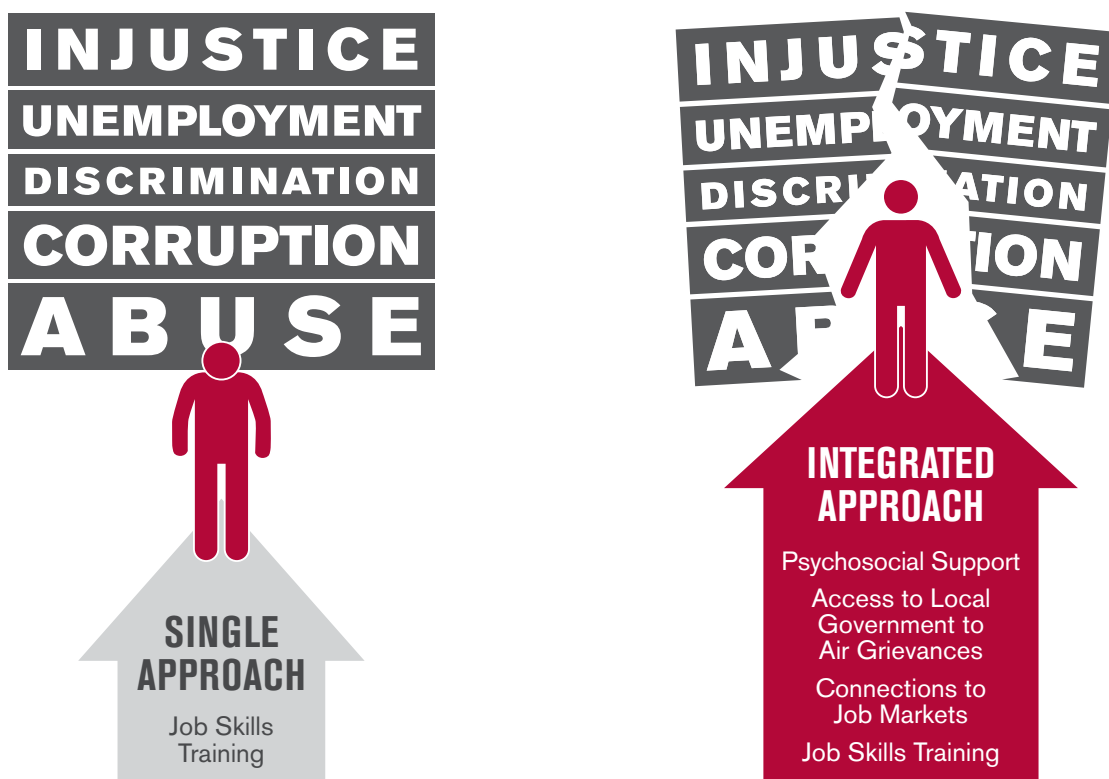
Organizational design, meanwhile, furnishes compounding challenges. While many major donors have issued youth strategies, program implementation continues to be piecemeal. The lack of youth coordinators, at the headquarters or mission level, contributes to strategic confusion. Absent a guiding hand, the approach has listed toward sectoral concentration.<sup>95</sup>

There is a tendency to create individual projects – economic development, education, conflict and peace building civil society – in which youth may be a target population, rather than youth-focused programs that bring different sectors under one roof.

The resulting problem, according to many donor staffers, is a lack of coordination. “The different sectoral teams never speak to one another,” said one staffer. “So the economic development people don’t talk to the education people. And the education people don’t talk to the civil society people.”

## Two Types of Intervention

Single-sector programs seek to address one challenge facing youth while ignoring others. This is ineffective. To break cycles of violence, efforts should be holistic. Market-driven jobs training should be paired with psychosocial support, protection, intercommunity peace building and governance reform.



95 IRC.

## ‘You Can’t Talk to Them’

Indicators drive much of the development enterprise. During interviews, indicators were seen, universally, as problematic. In theory, indicators are the data points, agreed upon between donor and implementer, that will prove whether the implementer did what they said they would, and whether the program was a success. But many indicators are divorced from impact. They fail to measure change. Instead, programs are assessed by what can be counted: the number of schools built, for example, or the number of young people who attend a training. Administrators can then divide the total cost by the number of beneficiaries to assess “value for money.”

The fault does not sit entirely in donors’ laps, of course. Many are themselves constrained – by political and regulatory pressures – to produce highly quantifiable outputs.

But too often, this amounts to building widgets. Accountability is vital, but a good audit does not necessarily make a successful program. Indeed, the assumptions built into the assessment may undermine the entire enterprise. According to Andrew Natsios – the former USAID administrator – the move to measurable, easy-to-audit results spawns inflexible programs, centralized decision making, a focus on the short-term, and an emphasis on accountability over local ownership.<sup>96</sup>

“NGOs and donors decide beforehand what they want to do,” said Deqa Isse. The director of youth in Puntland’s Ministry of Labor, Youth, and Sports, she described a development environment disconnected from life on the ground. “They’ve already signed the [Memoranda of Understanding] in Nairobi or Canada or the U.S., and they know what they want to do. You can’t talk to them.”

## Beyond Widgets

When successful, youth development can open up spaces, physical and imaginative, for young people to cultivate identities that resist the appeal of violence.

Yet there is still much we don’t know. We aren’t sure about the proper mix of programs, or how exactly to implement them, or for how long. Decades of effort have translated into few generalizable lessons. Increasingly, employing local, longitudinal studies on how attitudes and behaviors change will be necessary to improve learning and discard development’s “folk wisdom.”<sup>97</sup>

Too often, youth programs appear to be implemented without appropriate deliberation. Requests for applications (RFAs) from donors are not explicitly designed around program goals. And so “stabilization” programs, for instance, eschew addressing instability and, instead, are merely a mishmash of old approaches. There is a tendency to implement programs that have been implemented elsewhere, using boilerplate, sector-specific indicators. A youth vocational training program in Ghana looks much the same as it does in Nepal. While we must avoid reinventing the wheel, off-the-shelf, plug-and-play interventions,

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96 Andrew Natsios, *The Clash of the Counter-Bureaucracy and Development* (Washington: Center for Global Development, 2010).

97 Aldrich.

driven by the same assumptions, regardless of context, and designed to produce the same outputs are, unfortunately, the norm.

NGOs tend to go along. To their credit, programs often achieve exactly what they set out to do: build classrooms, train auto mechanics, organize a soccer tournament. But the implicit assumption is that these efforts will translate into greater stability and happier youth.

The tool may be at odds with the task: Stabilization by proxy risks ignoring the hard, necessary work of addressing young people's grievances.

To address systemic drivers of violence, the development community must speak with one voice. Where the state is corrupt, or predatory, financial support from bilateral and multilateral donors should come with conditions: to improve governance, combat corruption and reduce the social and political exclusion of youth. We must be firm partners for progress.

In places where there is no state, we must be nimble. NGOs – partnering with youth and communities – can navigate treacherous environments, provide much-needed technical expertise and offer alternatives to narratives of grievance that animate militias and terrorists. But to do so successfully we need help. We need longer time horizons for our programs, opportunities to flexibly evolve in order to meet unforeseen events, greater support for “soft” interventions like psychosocial work, and, most critically, a global commitment to addressing the challenges faced by youth in the world's most violent, unjust places.

“Normally, when you go to the doctor, he'll examine you before prescribing medication,” said a regional government official in Somalia. “Here we prescribe the medication before ever bothering to look at the patient.”

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Perhaps it's time to take another look at the patient. Getting the diagnosis right will require dispensing with old assumptions, explicitly programming to goals and coming together as a development

community to help the world's young people fulfill their promise, resist the appeal of violence and contribute to a peaceful, productive future.

**Young men repair tractors in a Mercy Corps' INVEST program class in Helmand province. The INVEST program has been proven to dramatically change the lives of those who participate, with families of the students routinely commenting on the profound positive change within their sons.**



# RECOMMENDATIONS



Young men participate in plumbing class in Mercy Corps' INVEST program, Helmand province.

## To All Donors and Implementing Agencies

### **Explicitly design programs for stability where stability is the goal.**

While unemployment is often emblematic of frustration and marginalization, employment status alone does not determine whether a young person is likely to join or support an insurgency. This finding is contrary to popular narratives yet supported by a growing body of research. It should lead to a reassessment of how development actors contribute to stabilization efforts. Where stability is the objective, programs must be deliberately designed to mitigate the root drivers of instability.

### **Inform programs by rigorous, iterative analysis of the drivers of instability.**

Programs with youth empowerment and stabilization objectives should be based on rigorous, context-specific assessments of why youth support violent groups. Assessments of conflict dynamics – including the political and historical legacies that shape youth incentives – should inform program design. This must be paired with the following aid reform efforts:

- **Support longer-term programming and adaptive management structures.** Developing a sufficient theory of change for how to mitigate youth conflict drivers and ensure that programming will engage the most vulnerable takes time. Longer-term programs with adaptive management allow development actors to respond to the complex and dynamic systems in which youth programs operate. Adaptive approaches are iterative. They require donors to build flexibility into program design and budgets, empowering implementers to evolve quickly.<sup>98</sup>
- **Revise procurement processes to profit from local know-how.** Overreliance on short-term contracts that are project based – as opposed to more flexible grants with a long-term time horizon – can undercut effectiveness. Unfortunately, application and bidding processes often exclude precisely those actors who are best positioned to leverage positive returns in fragile environments. We should look to nontraditional partners, including local community-based organizations (CBOs).
- **Extinguish the “burn rate.”** Prevailing political and policy incentives in the development field are to spend money in large amounts and to spend it quickly. Using disbursement rates as an indicator of good program management distorts incentives, encouraging development actors to simply “get the money off the books.” The need for speed results in top-down programming. Local ownership requires active partnership with local actors. Meaningful youth and community consultation and negotiation are time-consuming but, in terms of improved programs, well worth the effort.
- **Reform monitoring and evaluation (M&E) indicators, shifting from compliance to impact.** Monitoring and evaluation are often used to satisfy narrowly defined compliance requirements. Surveys are overly burdened with indicators and reporting requirements that are internally valid to the program but fail to extract generalizable lessons. Individual programs should be embedded in – and contribute to – a broader learning agenda. We need to grow the knowledge base, engage ideas, refine theories of change and rigorously test assumptions.
- **Fund research and learning.** Placing research and learning at the center of development means budgeting for it at the program level. Typically, however, the incentives run the other way. During the proposal phase, implementers, eager to win a grant or cooperative agreement, are

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98 For more on Mercy Corps' adaptive management approach, see Mercy Corps, *Navigating Complexity: Adaptive Management at the Northern Karamoja Growth, Health and Governance Program*, October 2014, <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/navigating-complexity-adaptive-management-northern-karamoja-growth-health>

implicitly discouraged from pushing for adequate learning budgets because it would make their bids uncompetitive. A percentage of project funding should be dedicated to research. USAID, for instance, stipulates 3 percent.<sup>99</sup>

- **Institutionalize ex post evaluations.** Donors and implementers should expand the time horizon and budget for knowledge gathering. Most development programs conclude with an “endline” evaluation conducted at the close of the program. Endline evaluations often fail to capture the types of program impacts that systemically change the sociopolitical, economic and political ecosystem of a community or country. This systems change, however, is the particular type of change we need to potentially alter youth engagement in violence.

**Design youth employability programs to address supply (technical and transferable skills) and demand (job creation).** Traditional youth employability programs have sought to increase incomes by building skills through vocational training or other nonformal education initiatives. However, this supply-side approach is often not synced with the needs of the market and may overlook the primary constraint: a lack of appropriate, available jobs. Even a sophisticated, highly educated population will struggle to find work if the right jobs simply do not exist. After rigorous market analysis, development actors should facilitate both demand-side (job creation through targeted private sector development) and supply-side (training based on local needs) initiatives.

**Explicitly design programs to meet adolescent needs (ages 12-17).**

The push and pull factors that encourage a young person to engage in violence are particularly potent during adolescence, but prevailing development frameworks often target investment toward children (under 12) or adults (18 and over). Development programs need to be savvy to the needs of adolescents: Meeting their specific psychosocial and development needs will support them in becoming agents for prosperity and stability.

## To the United Nations and Multilateral Donors

**Elevate primacy of youth mainstreaming in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).**

As the global community gathers to advance a road map for the Post-2015 Development Agenda and SDGs, institutionalizing the needs of at-risk youth is vital to the effort’s success. Member States should endorse and elevate the youth-focused target areas proposed by the Global Partnership for Youth in the Post-2015 Development Agenda. These include targets in the stand-alone goals on Education, Employment, Health, Peace and Stability.<sup>100</sup> To ensure that these issues are accurately represented in the Declaration, appropriate age, gender and urban/rural status impact assessments should be conducted for target goals. Furthermore, a committed cohort of Member States should be identified to champion youth targets in the SDGs and make specific commitments to reach targets by 2020.

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99 USAID, Evaluation: *Learning From Experience: USAID Evaluation Policy* (Washington: USAID, 2011), <http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1868/USAIDEvaluationPolicy.pdf>.

100 The Global Partnership for Youth in the Post-2015 Development Agenda is a joint initiative by the Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth in partnership with ITU, UNFPA, the UN Millennium Campaign, The Major Group on Children and Youth, ICMYO, and the Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development (IANYD).



### **Enhance coordination across political (institutional) and development (community-based) initiatives.**

In most complex humanitarian and development contexts, United Nations' agencies and International Financial Institutions are often assigned the difficult task of coordinating the international response. Unfortunately, conflict-prone states are often home to competing political, security, development and humanitarian frameworks to guide international engagement, and coordination suffers in the context where it is needed most. The strong correlations between youth support for political violence and issues of exclusive governance, injustice and perceptions of equity should revive commitments to better align transparency and joint strategic planning of major political and development investments.

### **Improve data collection – disaggregating by age, gender and urban/rural status – and report on demographically specific development outcomes and investments.**

Development efforts should be tailored according to the life experiences and needs of young people, taking into account age, gender, class, education and urban/rural status. A 14-year-old girl in Mogadishu has different needs than, say, a 22-year-old man in rural Colombia. In the U.S., for example, the Office of Management and Budget should require disaggregated data, indicating who youth are and where they live, for all U.S. foreign assistance programs working in youth activities. Ensuring all youth targets are complemented by indicators that represent best data practices is vital to ensuring success.

## **To Host Governments and Bilateral Donor Governments**

### **Appoint permanent “youth coordinators” in foreign assistance agencies.**

Across host and donor governments, youth development efforts suffer from a major structural gap: There is often no central youth advocate or coordinator.<sup>101</sup> A youth coordinator should have a mandate and the support staff necessary to identify critical priorities concerning youth across development portfolios; to ensure policy coherence, accountability and transparency; and to guide the mainstreaming, integration and coordination of more evidence-based youth programming.

### **Develop democracy and governance (D&G) and countering violent extremism (CVE) strategies informed by rigorous analyses of the political, social and economic factors that drive youth to support political violence.**

Over the past decade, national and donor governments have invested heavily in supply-side, elite-saturated capacity building, law enforcement and democracy-related programs to enhance good governance. More recently, CVE investments to decrease the appeal of extremist groups among youth have focused on foreign-crafted counter-messaging campaigns and counter-radicalization and rehabilitation programs; job training and social reintegration for former supporters of foreign terrorist organizations; and top-down law enforcement and/or civil society training programs. Strategies must better understand youth incentives. The goal is not only to ensure efforts are youth-led and locally owned, but also to increase the legitimacy of the effort, manage tensions between younger and older generations and assist in defining the youth role in governance.

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<sup>101</sup> USAID's Youth in Development Policy acknowledges that USAID has no formal structure for youth development programs, which creates challenges for integrating and coordinating youth activities, and for tracking youth-specific investments across bureaus. See USAID, 2012.

### **End “siloed” earmark assistance that undermines program effectiveness.**

In the U.S. context, administration and congressional earmarks or appropriations “directives” dictate foreign assistance dollars from Washington, D.C. This results in U.S. foreign aid dollars flowing toward sectors, such as food security, water, basic education and health, that do not necessarily reflect needs on the ground. Instead, we should work to enhance the flexibility of USAID Missions to craft multi-sector responses to complex, multifaceted problems that drive youth to violence. Decreasing earmarks and empowering USAID Missions to craft multi-sector solutions would vastly improve the effectiveness of youth (and other development) interventions.

## **To Nongovernmental Implementing Organizations**

### **Revise “capacity building,” shifting to an investment model that capitalizes on youth experiences, capacities and diversity.**

Drivers of conflict are complex and locally rooted. And while this paper identifies crosscutting themes, future efforts must start not with a report, but with the youth themselves. Young people are critical – if typically underutilized – partners in peace-building efforts and development initiatives. Youth priorities and experiences should guide the articulation of goals, program indicators and governance reforms. Young people can, likewise, be invaluable in implementation by conducting baseline studies and assessments, promoting efforts through social media, and – as evinced by the value of former fighters in peace building – playing vital roles in reintegration efforts.

### **Improve beneficiary selection.**

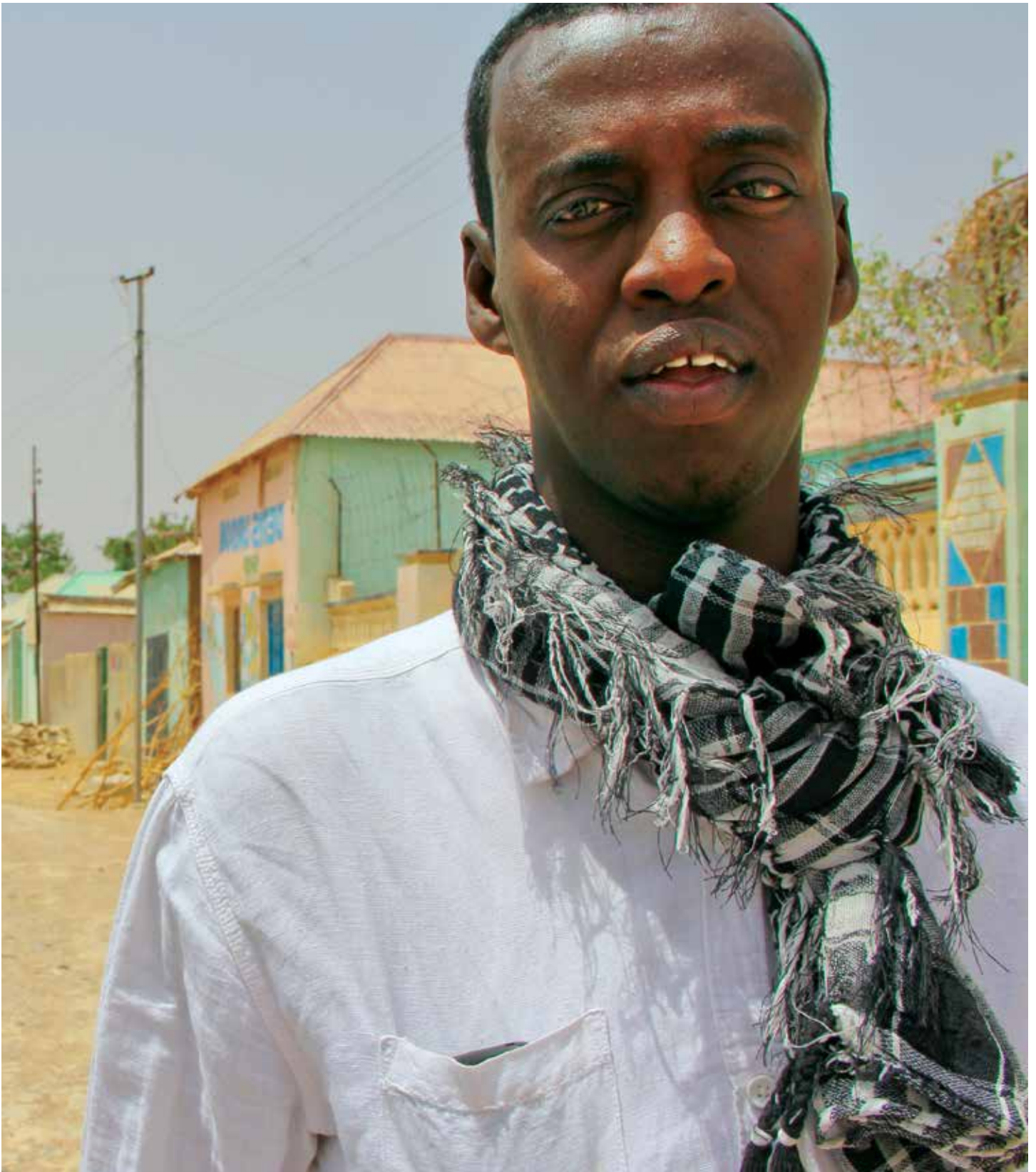
Where selection criteria are poorly defined or poorly implemented, implementers tend to prioritize the easiest to reach, or beneficiaries simply self-select. Targeting should be intentional, but this requires gathering greater information on the youth population through extensive preprogramming surveys and the development of “at-risk” profiles. Identifying the most marginalized young people may require going house-to-house to find those who are not in school. Obviously, this requires time and bigger budgets. Donors and implementers should also consider midterm assessments that aim to identify the youth a program is missing. We should regularly ask if we are in the right communities, reaching the right youth. Reviewing for gaps in targeting can inform where programs are falling down.

### **When working with at-risk youth, emphasize opportunity – not inducements.**

It is not uncommon for development programs to provide inducements – money, food – to get young people through the door. In some cases, this may be necessary, but it encourages the participation of youth who may be ambivalent about the program or its success. Development actors should attract beneficiaries through the strength of their programs, not by divvying out carrots.

### **Cultivate local communities.**

Youth programs should be embedded in local communities, bringing together individuals to address need, transform attitudes, enhance linkages and harness local expertise. Skills training programs should be taught by local businesspeople. Adult mentors should be recruited and cultivated. Mentorship is vital because it helps young people in school-to-work transitions. In many cases, community engagement is not simply about giving young people new opportunities, but also – where young people are seen as dangerous or lazy – changing the attitudes of the community toward youth.



Mohammed Adrus, 23, is a graduate of SYLI's civic engagement program. "There are many social evils here," he said. "Corruption is very big. I have seen that the most important thing is to build the youth network, to have a unit, and to be unified in politics," he said.

## ABOUT MERCY CORPS

**Mercy Corps is a leading global humanitarian agency saving and improving lives in the world's toughest places.**

With a network of experienced professionals in more than 40 countries, we partner with local communities to put bold ideas into action to help people recover, overcome hardship and build better lives. Now, and for the future.

Cover photo: At 19, Jhon Freddy Salceido Perez took steps toward the goal of earning a degree in mechanical engineering with an internship at a metal factory. This was part of a program for demobilized child soldiers supported by Mercy Corps. He was 13 when he joined Colombia's largest rebel group, the FARC. Cali, Colombia.

Colombia – Miguel Samper for Mercy Corps



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