

EXPLORING THE DEVELOPMENT OF CROSS-SECTORAL SKILLS FOR YOUTH: REFLECTIONS FROM THE CROSS-SECTORAL SKILLS COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE



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INTRODUCTION

This brief, developed by the Cross-Sectoral Skills for Youth CoP, offers an overview of current research findings on cross-sectoral skills development; summarizes promising practices, implementation challenges, and unanswered questions about cross-sectoral youth programs; and concludes with three case studies that describe the impacts of taking a cross-sectoral approach on youth. The brief was developed collaboratively after a July 17, 2019, meeting in Washington, DC, titled “Lessons Learned in Achieving a Cross-Sectoral Impact.” The meeting attracted more than 60 participants, including researchers; leaders of Positive Youth Development (PYD) programs; and representatives from USAID, other donors, and youth-led organizations.

WHAT ARE CROSS-SECTORAL SKILLS AND WHY DO THEY MATTER?

Development practitioners, funders, and policymakers are keenly interested in identifying strategies that enhance the expected results of global youth projects, including their impact across various sectors (e.g., health, education, civic engagement). Often, such projects center on building the cognitive, emotional, and social skills that youth require to develop self-control and agency, overcome challenges, and achieve their fullest potential. Approaches that build these “soft skills” effectively are being evaluated by researchers, along with identifying the types of soft skills that youth programs should prioritize.

In 2015, USAID invested in a seminal study that identified five critical soft skills that contribute to workforce success:²

- Positive self-concept: self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-awareness, self-esteem, wellbeing
- Self-control: delay gratification, focused attention, impulse control,
- Higher-order thinking: problem solving, critical thinking, decision-making
- Social skills: respect for others, context-appropriate behavior, conflict resolution
- Communication skills: oral, written, non-verbal

In a follow-on study, USAID (2016) identified the critical soft skills youth need to achieve success across multiple sectors: positive self-concept, self-control, and higher-order thinking. As Figure 1 illustrates, building these skills has been found to have positive impacts on youth across three sectors: workforce development (WfD), violence prevention, and sexual and reproductive health (SRH).³ The graphic also conveys that communication and social skills each contribute to positive outcomes in at least two sectors (respectively, in WfD and SRH and in WfD and violence prevention), while goal orientation and empathy each contribute to positive outcomes in at least one sector (SRH).

Soft Skills :A Brief Synopsis

The term “soft skills” was first defined in 1972 by the US military as “important job-related skills which involve little or no interaction with machines.” By the 1990s, workforce development programs were using the term to encompass a broad set of competencies, behaviors, attitudes, and personal qualities that enable people to navigate their environments, work collaboratively, perform well, and achieve professional goals. Currently, development programs in education, health, civic engagement, and other sectors build soft skills, though they can often use other terms, such as foundational skills, transferable skills; socio-emotional skills, and life skills.

1 Whitmore, Paul G., “What are soft skills?”, Paper presented at the CONARC Soft Skills Conference, Texas, 12-13 December 1972

2 Lippman, L.H., Ryberg, R., Carney, R. and Moore, K.A. (2015). Key “Soft Skills” that Foster Youth Workforce Success: Toward a Consensus Across Fields. Washington, DC: USAID, FHI 360, Child Trends. Published through the Workforce Connections project managed by FHI 360 and funded by USAID. <https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/2015-24WFCSoftSkills1.pdf>

3 Gates, S., Lippman, L., Shadowen, N., Burke, H., Diener, O., and Malkin, M. (2016). Key Soft Skills for Cross-Sectoral Youth Outcomes. Washington, DC: USAID’s YouthPower: Implementation, YouthPower Action. <https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/resource-soft-skills-report.pdf>

Figure 1: Key Cross-Sectoral Soft Skills



PROGRAMMATIC LESSONS LEARNED ON BUILDING CROSS- SECTORAL SKILLS

At the July 2019 meeting, Cross-Sectoral Skills for Youth CoP members shared their experiences with funding, designing, and implementing youth programs that aimed to teach youth these cross-sectoral skills in order to achieve cross-sectoral impacts. They developed consensus on promising practices, current challenges, and questions that warrant further investigation and research.

Promising Practices

CoP members favored the following approaches and strategies:

- Programs that aim for cross-sectoral impacts should identify, build, and reinforce cross-sectoral skills from design to delivery.
- Youth programs should be explicitly designed for cross-sectoral impact, where feasible, with relevant, specific indicators that measure youth cross-sectoral skill development. Cross-sectoral impacts are more likely when cross-sectoral skills are embedded in the program's design, indicators, and intended outcomes.
- Programs should ensure youth can apply their newfound skills across multiple sectors of interest, rather than providing sector-specific capacity building with no linkages to cross-sectoral applications.
- Youth programs that provide direct support to youth through facilitators and mentors should build capacity of facilitators and mentors to ensure they are able to reinforce youth's new cross-sectoral skills development, guide their application and integration, and assist youth to work through challenges.⁴

Current Challenges

CoP members at the July 2019 meeting referenced several design and implementation challenges in this emerging field:

- Youth programs that target cross-sectoral outcomes have not developed consensus on optimum timing dosage for introducing and reinforcing new cross-sectoral skills that ensures the skill building activities are relevant in a young person's life.

- The cross-sectoral skills being developed may only be applicable or measurable after the life of the program. For example, when a program equips adolescents with sound decision-making skills in SRH but the adolescents are not yet sexually active, the program's impact on behavior change may not be reflected in program results.
- Youth-led programs may need to be convinced of the value of a cross-sectoral skills approach. When identifying key skills, youth and their family members may underestimate the importance of cross-sectoral skills and their impact on multiple sectors by prioritizing other skills they feel provide more immediate impact.
- Similarly, some donors undervalue cross-sectoral skills-building due to their sector-specific focus or objectives; this is often amplified if the impact of cross-sectoral approaches is not fully realized before a project closes.
- Conducting rigorous evaluations that isolate different interventions in order to generate more evidence about the value-add of cross-sectoral programming can be complex and time-consuming and there is not commonly funding for these.

Unanswered Questions

Meeting participants identified questions requiring additional investigation:

- How should cross-sectoral interventions be timed and sequenced? Does leading with technical content (e.g., teaching cooking or car repair skills) and adding cross-sectoral skills have greater impact than leading with cross-sectoral skills and adding technical content? Or do both approaches have similar impacts?
- What is the best dosage and timing of mentoring and ongoing support for cross-sectoral skill-building that enhances the achievement of cross-sectoral results?
- Is there evidence that youth programs building cross-sectoral skills have negative impacts, unintended consequences, or specific limitations?
- Is there evidence that cross-sectoral youth programs obtain quicker, deeper, and stronger outcomes than single-sector youth programs?
- What is the best way for global youth programs to gain donor support and buy-in for cross-sectoral designs and approaches?

⁴ This approach is addressed in Soares, F., Babb, S., Diener, O., Gates, S., and Ignatowski, C. (2017). Guiding Principles for Building Soft Skills among Adolescents and Young Adults. Washington, DC: USAID's YouthPower: Implementation, YouthPower Action. <https://www.youthpower.org/resources/guiding-principles-building-soft-and-life-skills-among-adolescents-and-young-adults>

Given that donors increasingly want clear demonstrations of the impacts of their investments, development practitioners must show a clear understanding of the potential benefits of cross-sectoral programs, including whether these are likely to yield increased efficiencies or better outcomes than single-sector programs.

To this end, meeting participants acknowledged the need to share knowledge, build on promising practices in cross-sectoral programming, and gather and analyze sound data on specific cross-sectoral skills and skill-building approaches that enhance youth's transition to healthy and successful adulthood.



Meg Edwin

CASE STUDIES

In response to the July 2019 meeting’s request for case studies, the Youth Learning Community of Practice provided information from three USAID-funded programs that aimed for or achieved cross-sectoral impacts:

1. Algeria Youth Employment Project (YEP), 2015–2019, a workforce development project led by World Learning that integrated peacebuilding activities
2. Somali Youth Learners Initiative (SYLI), 2011–2016, a project led by Mercy Corps that combined education, government support, and civic engagement goals
3. Skills to Succeed (S2S) 2018-2019, a workforce development project in Bangladesh led by Save the Children that YouthPower Action supported to test the addition and integration of SRH interventions

Case Study 1. Algeria Youth Employment Project (YEP)

For this five-year project, World Learning developed a unique employability and soft-skills training curriculum that promoted cross-sectoral skills development: civic engagement and peaceful co-existence alongside

employment goals. The curriculum emphasized:

- intercultural understanding, empathy, and the valuing of commonalities and differences between individuals and communities
- community and civic engagement, active participation, reciprocity, and respect
- social inclusion, justice, self-determination, interdependence, and equity for disadvantaged groups

A qualitative YEP research study that centered on employment and employability gathered participants’ perspectives on the key soft skills they had acquired.⁵ An unexpected finding was that peacebuilding activities advanced workforce preparedness and ability to find work. Many respondents connected advances in their positive self-concept—a core workforce development skill—with YEP modules that targeted civic engagement, empathy, and inclusion.

Within an instructional context that explicitly valued everyone’s participation, respondents said their exposure to other youth strengthened their own self-concept and motivation. A young man referenced “amazing” encounters at the career center, where “people...taught me how to talk, when to talk, and

Figure 2: SYLI’s Conceptual Framework

PREDICTORS	MEDIATING VARIABLES	OUTCOMES
Secondary education provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Optimism regarding livelihood prospects• Reduced social isolation and exclusion• Perceived possibility to effect community change	Material and moral support for armed opposition groups
Civic engagement opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Confidence in nonviolent means of affecting change• Confidence in federal government• Confidence in state government	Material and moral support for the government

⁵ Focus group discussions and questionnaires were conducted with 90 employed and unemployed young women and men in six provinces. Employers around the country were also interviewed.

that you don't have to talk all the time. The diversity of educational backgrounds was very enriching.”

Another participant stated he had developed social skills, widened his network, and been inspired and motivated by a woman who regularly brought her child to classes. And one young woman testified, “The leadership workshop...taught me that everyone can be a leader.... [and] that we can all have different styles of leadership. It empowered me and taught me how to deal with people more efficiently. I look at people within a group much differently now. When I look at someone, I try to see their potential and how to use it to everyone's advantage.”

This evidence suggests that YEP advanced WfD and peacebuilding goals concurrently. Curricula and trainings that focused on inclusion and social cohesion, rather than on individuals, increased participants' respect and appreciation for people different from themselves.

Purpose-designed research (i.e., research particularly focused on identifying cross-sectoral outcomes) is required to support this supposition and help identify relevant indicators and potential outcomes for analogous cross-sectoral programs.

Case Study 2. Somali Youth Learners Initiative (SYLI)

For SYLI, Mercy Corps aimed to prove that increased access to quality education and civic engagement opportunities in targeted regions of Somalia would reduce the likelihood that in-school and out-of-school youth would support or participate in armed groups and political violence. Figure 2 outlines predictors, mediating variables, and outcomes of project activities that included support for formal and non-formal secondary education and good governance; the strengthening of youth organizations and networks, trainings for youth on leadership and conflict resolution, and the establishment of youth advocacy and discussion forums.

A comprehensive endline study⁶ measured how each of predictors changed attitudes of youth in targeted areas previously controlled by armed groups, as well as how attitudes changes when the two predictors were combined.

The study found that the access to quality secondary education significantly reduced youth support for violence in areas that availed only limited basic services. But in more developed and stable Somaliland, this provision did not suffice to address grievances and reduce support for political violence.

More significant reductions were seen when secondary education was combined with civic engagement activities for youth, such as advocacy campaigns and community service projects. The study findings suggest that holistic, cross-sectoral skills programs have greater impacts on attitudes and behaviors than single-sector programs. It also concluded that trainings for youth on concrete skills must be combined with opportunities to apply them.

Case Study 3. Bangladesh Skills to Succeed (S2S)

Save the Children received a grant from YouthPower Action to test the efficacy of adding family planning/reproductive health (FP/RH) interventions to WfD activities in targeted areas of Dhaka, Bangladesh, that aimed to reduce unemployment and underemployment among at-risk youth ages 16–24. FP/RH trainings were integrated into the existing S2S employability skills curriculum for a randomized selection of 15 youth clubs. An equal number of youth clubs, designated as control, used only the default WfD curriculum, which included trainings in higher-order thinking, communication, social skills, self-control, and positive self-concept. Local implementing partners were responsible for the activities at all youth clubs.

The grant funded a two-part research study: an impact evaluation and a qualitative process evaluation. It addressed two questions:⁷

1. Does integrating WfD and FP/RH components facilitate stronger workforce and FP/RH outcomes than a WfD intervention alone?
2. How does integration take place? What are the associated challenges, best practices, and solutions?

The impact evaluation was inconclusive. Though it noted statistically significant effects for a few outcomes (such as improved positive identity and contraceptive knowledge), these were not apparent at endline.

6 Tesfaye, B., McDougal, T., Maclin, B., & Blum, A. (2018). If Youth Are Given the Chance: Effects of Education and Civic Engagement on Somali Youth Support for Political Violence. Washington, DC: Mercy Corps. <https://www.kpsr1.org/publication/if-youth-are-given-the-chance-effects-of-education-and-civic-engagement-on-somali-youth-support-of-political-violence>

7 YouthPower Action. February 2020. Integrating Workforce Development and Reproductive Health for Improved Youth Outcomes. Final Study Report.

Implementation differences were found to have played a substantial role. Local implementing partners were challenged to staff the youth clubs, ensure consistent attendance and planned schedules, and win community acceptance for FP/RH trainings.

Managing “the add-on modality of integration” was an overall challenge, in that “the FP/RH content was added on top of the regular number of hours within employability skills training, and separate staff were hired to deliver this content.” The study posited “the blending of content” as the better option in cross-sectoral skills training. In this scenario, the employability program would present “knowledge elements” on FP/RH as part of the VfD skills training, “within the same number of curricular hours.”

Notwithstanding, the process evaluation found “areas where the integrated program added value for youth,” such as increased knowledge about puberty, menstruation, and related nutritional practices. Though youth did not evidence substantially improved knowledge on FP/RH topics, they were assessed as “better equipped to identify when they need more knowledge and able to seek it out.”

The two-part study had revealed “the full complexity of integration of FP/RH content in a workforce training program, while demonstrating the undeniable value of the health knowledge in youth reflections.” It concluded by calling for more research on “the various modalities of implementation and measurement” in relation to the “goals of the program in the short term.”

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the three case studies highlight the importance of;

1. explicitly designing programs for cross-sectoral impact, where feasible, with relevant, specific indicators that measure youth cross-sectoral skill development; and
2. supporting youth in their ability to apply their newfound skills across multiple sectors of interest.

Additionally, the case studies reinforce the Community of Practice’s recommendation for further research and evidence to understand the full impact of cross-sectoral programming that can further advance best practices for implementation.



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USAID YouthPower Learning generates and disseminates knowledge about the implementation and impact of positive youth development (PYD) and cross-sectoral approaches in international development. The project leads research, evaluations, and events designed to build the evidence base related to PYD. Concurrently, YouthPower Learning employs expertise in learning and knowledge sharing to promote engagement and inform the global community about how to successfully help transition young people into productive, healthy adults. YouthPower Learning supports the implementation of the 2012 USAID Youth in Development Policy to improve capacity and enable the aspirations of youth so that they can contribute to, and benefit from, more stable, democratic, and prosperous communities.

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