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STATE OF THE EVIDENCE UPDATE:

# Soft Skills Interventions

Part of the USAID Learning Series: Youth Workforce Development in 2022: What Have We Learned?

After four years advancing learning through its Youth Workforce Development Learning Agenda, USAID initiated a process in 2022 to review new evidence related to the learning questions. In addition to a desk review, consultations were also held with stakeholders involved in youth skills development, employment, and entrepreneurship programming in low- and middle-income countries. The **State of the Evidence Updates** each offer a short synopsis of learning around some of USAID's current learning agenda themes.

This particular State of the Evidence Update focuses on the most recent evidence in soft skills development, answering the following question: *What are the most effective implementation interventions for fostering soft skills among youth?*

This document summarizes evidence in the past five years around the different types of soft skills and related interventions that have shown to lead to demonstrated skills gains, employment and earnings, as well as other cross-sectoral youth outcomes.

Due to the abundance of evidence on the topic and the rapid nature of USAID's [state of the evidence](#) review process, this analysis focuses largely on systematic reviews and evaluations using experimental or quasi-experimental methods. Links to each piece of research are offered so that the reader may examine the evidence for themselves.



## SKILLS ATTAINMENT AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

**Research confirms that targeted soft skills instruction and support can lead to demonstrated gains in a number of social-emotional skills and well-being outcomes across different sectors and sub-populations.**

A 2021 USAID [Social and Emotional Learning \(SEL\) Systematic Review](#) highlighted the numerous impacts of cross-sectoral soft skills programs in development contexts:

- (1) Several programs targeting life skills and health outcomes showed benefits in self-efficacy, agency, and perception of gender roles in addition to other health outcomes.
- (2) Four workforce programs revealed positive effects on self-efficacy among females, but weaker and adverse effects for males facing structural barriers to employment.
- (3) A combination of cognitive behavioral therapy and cash reduced anti-social behavior in at risk-men in one program in Liberia.
- (4) A review of nine studies of programs for orphans and vulnerable children (including adolescents ages 15-18+) showed largely positive effects, such as improved resilience, coping mechanisms, self-esteem, problem solving, and reduction of behavioral problems.

- (5) Within programs that included ethnic and tribal minorities, these marginalized populations tended to outperform participants from majority groups in well-being and in academics.
- (6) One program that included learners with disabilities also found that learners with disabilities outperformed other participants in earnings, while both groups realized gains in social and emotional skills.<sup>1</sup>

**The results in humanitarian contexts were more mixed: while 64 percent of SEL programs showed largely positive outcomes, they experienced a great deal of variation in effects across different sub-groups.** Sub-groups that experienced null or negative effects included:

- (1) adolescent boys in areas of protracted conflict facing structural economic barriers
- (2) war-affected adolescent girls experiencing re-traumatization/PTSD brought on by psycho-social support programs
- (3) displaced adolescent girls exposed to increased vulnerabilities brought on by training programs
- (4) refugee adolescents with protection concerns.<sup>2</sup>

This review concluded that programs often led to considerably different, and sometimes negative, outcomes particularly among adolescents, and recommended that programs pay greater attention to the needs and outcomes based on gender, context, exposure to stressors, and displacement status.<sup>3</sup>

**A combination of classroom training and peer-based support is a promising practice for the development of soft skills in low-resource environments.** Participants who graduated from an Educate! soft skills training program in Uganda [showed significant gains in soft skills](#) such as creativity, grit, stress management, and self-efficacy. The program offered training in social entrepreneurship and leadership, and was supplemented with peer mentoring and student-led business development clubs. This training was delivered by youth mentors in government, private, and community schools. The program, however, did not increase learners' business knowledge more than the comparison group; Educate! used this evidence to update the program's business and career planning curriculum.

**Youth gain soft skills when they undergo an intentional soft skills course, but are less likely to gain those skills through technical training and work experience alone.** Young technical and vocational education and training (TVET) students who participated in the International Youth Foundation's program in South Africa received life skills curriculum along with classroom based technical training and workplace experiences; a control group did not receive the life skills training. The treatment group [scored higher than a control group on skills such as problem-solving, leadership, goal-setting, and other non-cognitive skills](#). Similarly, women participants in the Dominican Republic's Ministry of Labor's Juventud y Empleo program, which combined classroom training in life skills, alongside vocational training and workplace experience through internships, had [higher levels of a number of soft skills including self-esteem](#) three years after the program than the control group who received no life skills training.

**A minimum duration and/or intensity of the soft skills training program makes a difference in its impact.** In a full time, in-residence three-week mini-MBA program for Ugandan secondary students focusing on 75% soft skills and 25 percent hard (business-related) skills, members of the soft-skills treatment group exhibited [higher self-efficacy and better negotiation strategies and persuasion skills](#) relative to those in the hard skills-focused (25 percent soft/75 percent hard) group. In a somewhat similar finding in Jamaica, a shorter five-week soft-skills course combined with hard skills (another five weeks) did not see any effects among small-scale adult<sup>4</sup> entrepreneurs, compared to the longer 10-week soft-skills-only course that did lead to soft skills gains, suggesting the [importance of dosage](#) in the development of

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<sup>1</sup> USAID (2021). SEL Systematic Review, pp. 84-90.

<sup>2</sup> USAID (2021). SEL Systematic Review, pp. 79-83.

<sup>3</sup> Id., 95.

<sup>4</sup> While the average age of participants in this study was 42, the findings can nevertheless offer useful insights that may bear relevance to youth, as a large number of businesses were those that had existed for less than one year and were considered to be small and informal.

soft skills. This is supported by the USAID SEL Systematic Review<sup>5</sup> as well as [earlier findings in Jordan](#) that a soft skills training lasting 45 hours over a nine-day period resulted in no meaningful effects.

**The quality of teachers and instruction matters.** Two comparable randomized controlled trials (RCTs) of women-owned micro and small enterprises in Ethiopia found that skills gains from training were achieved [only when delivered by a seasoned instructor who had similar experience](#) in running a business. When there was this “shared identity match between trainer and student,” the study found higher levels of entrepreneurial self-efficacy, personal initiative, and entrepreneurial locus of control. Similarly, in Uganda, the success of the mini-MBA program was attributed to the [“high quality intervention”](#) in which “teachers received extensive, high-quality training on teaching methods and soft and hard skills knowledge.” Meanwhile, the Jamaica soft skills training for entrepreneurs [“paid special attention to certifying the quality of the trainers”](#) and [“implemented several methods to monitor quality”](#) such as student feedback forms distributed after each class, randomized monitoring site visits by an evaluator, and end-of-program student evaluations. The curriculum, which focused on personal initiative, developing a proactive mindset, and perseverance in the face of setbacks, indeed led to persistent gains in perseverance, overcoming barriers, and grit.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, a sports and life skills development program for young adults in Liberia [did not improve their soft skills](#), although it did increase their labor force participation, with effects the strongest among the most marginalized groups; the study theorizes that different outcomes may have been observed had the program used different training coaches such as “professional counselors, trained therapists or job placement experts.”



## EMPLOYMENT-RELATED OUTCOMES<sup>7</sup>

**More often than not, soft skills gains have not directly translated into higher employment or earnings over the long-term.** While there is much evidence establishing the [correlation between soft skills and earnings](#), earlier stocktakings of evidence have not been able to show conclusive evidence on the *direct causal effects* of soft skills attainment on employment-related outcomes.<sup>8</sup> Three recent studies illustrate that soft skills training may have a short-term “accelerating” effect, but that these effects tend to dissipate after several years:

- While the [Uganda participants](#) (mentioned above) showed gains in employability-related soft skills, after four years they did not see higher rates of employment or earnings in the treatment group versus the comparison group.
- In [Jamaica](#), the soft skills training rendered short-term effects on business outcomes among male entrepreneurs, but these effects dissipated after 12 months.
- A soon-to-be published end-line RCT study found that a comprehensive training program for young entrepreneurs in Rwanda (one that includes soft skills and entrepreneurship training, job intermediation, coaching, and savings mobilization) increased youth’s number of productive working hours, productive assets,

<sup>5</sup> USAID (2021). Social and Emotional Learning Systematic Review, pp. 86, 100, 101.

<sup>6</sup> In order to measure these soft skills gains, two follow-up surveys were conducted among participants. In the first, three months after the training, a Jamaica-based survey firm asked questions on sales, profits, business practices, and soft skills. In the second follow-up survey, 12 months after training, participants completed a comprehensive self-reporting questionnaire including “detailed psychological modules to measure a range of soft skills (based on Campos et al. (2017): “Teaching personal initiative beats traditional training in boosting small business in West Africa,” *Science*, 357, 1287–1290). In addition, the study measured grit with a game consisting of monetary incentives, developed by Alan et al. (2019): “Ever Failed, Try Again, Succeed Better: Results from a Randomized Educational Intervention on Grit,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 134, 1121–1162.

<sup>7</sup> For the purpose of this document, “employment-related outcomes” refers to the range of outcomes related to employment status (either wage-based or self-employment), earnings, labor force participation, and productivity.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example: (a) Heckman and Kautz (2012). Hard Evidence on Soft Skills. (b) Kluge et. al. (2016) Interventions to Improve the Labour Market Outcomes of Youth: A Systematic Review of Training, Entrepreneurship Promotion, Employment Services and Subsidized Employment Interventions. (c) Fox and Kaul (USAID 2017). The evidence is in: How should youth employment programs in low-income countries be designed? (d) USAID (2021). Soft Skills and Youth Workforce Development in Sub-Saharan Africa. A Review of the Literature, p. 32.

average daily business sales, debt reduction, and business knowledge, but that the impacts observed at 18 months had largely faded after 3.5 years.<sup>9</sup>

**But continually emerging data continues to challenge this body of evidence, and points to the lasting effects of soft skills on employment and earnings for certain sub-populations of youth.** The following examples demonstrate how soft skills instruction has led to lasting employment gains:

- In Cali, Colombia, TVET participants who were exposed to a curriculum emphasizing soft skills (with some vocational training in the service sector) experienced [greater effects on employment, hours worked, and earnings](#) after 17 months of completing the program, than those exposed to a curriculum emphasizing the technical skills. The benefits seen by both groups could possibly be explained because of the participant profile: **urban youth working in wage-based jobs**<sup>10</sup> in the services sector may have benefited more from training than the participants of other studies (Uganda, Rwanda, Jamaica who tended to be earning a living through self-employment). Interestingly, the effectiveness of the Colombia trainings were magnified when participants were offered a daily stipend of \$1.50 for transportation and food, indicating that even in cases of wage-based employment, **resource constraints** may negatively impact the ability of participants to reap the benefits of training.
- The earlier-mentioned [Uganda mini-MBA program](#) focusing on soft skills led to increased business startups, business survival, higher profits, and job creation after three and a half years. Interestingly, youth in the same program but with a curriculum comprised of 25 percent soft skills and 75 percent hard skills experienced similar effects.<sup>11</sup> The study attributes this success to business training that was tailored to participants' needs and fostered an entrepreneurial mindset; it also notes that the participants consisted of nearly-graduating students with plans to attend university, and that **the targeting of these highly motivated students** may have affected the outcomes.

**Business outcomes among entrepreneurs seem to be supported by the presence of follow-up interventions (e.g., coaching, mentoring, tailored business services).** Earlier literature<sup>12</sup> has long indicated that when practical training is combined with complementary services such as work-based learning, business coaching, or employment services, we see positive impacts among youth in low- and middle-income countries. The latest evidence underscores these findings. The [Jamaica study](#) (mentioned above) posits that the lack of follow-on support interventions may have been the key reason for the dissipating effects of soft skills and technical training. This study compares its results with that of an earlier [2017 study in Togo](#), which provided post-training individual business visits to soft skill training participants, who experienced large and persistent effects in business outcomes. The Rwanda RCT report<sup>13</sup> suggested that access to finance (as much as a \$845 cash grant) was not enough to support lasting business effects; another [evaluation](#) of this same Rwanda program suggests that business outcomes may be magnified with a higher quality and more intensive level of follow-on business support.

**Soft skills interventions can contribute to other sectoral outcomes.** As noted at the start of this brief, [USAID's SEL Systematic Review](#) found that soft skills instruction had “promising effects” on a number of sectoral outcomes, with effects varying by age and gender, and particularly among marginalized groups. This review found impacts on education,

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<sup>9</sup> McIntosh, Craig and Andrew Zeitlin (unpublished draft dated March 2022). “Youth Employment and Productivity: Medium-term Experimental Evidence from Rwanda.”

<sup>10</sup> There is further evidence showing how on-the-job soft skills training increases the productivity of wage workers. A recent randomized study on youth and adult wage workers in the retail sector in Latin America found that on-the-job soft skills training focusing on leadership and communications led to increases in individual- and store-level productivity. (Adhvaryu et. al 2018); similarly, an earlier study found that youth and adult garment sector workers in India increased their productivity with on-the-job soft skills training (Adhvaryu et. al. 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Soft skills were collected through self-reported and task-based measures, including participation in a short negotiation exercise with an incentivized payoff.

<sup>12</sup> For example, refer to [Datta et. al. 2018](#) and [Kluve et. al 2017](#).

<sup>13</sup> McIntosh, Craig and Andrew Zeitlin (unpublished draft dated March 2022). “Youth Employment and Productivity: Medium-term Experimental Evidence from Rwanda.”

workforce, and health outcomes (even when no soft skills improvements were found). Other recent studies have contributed the following sectoral findings:

- **Education Outcomes:** [Educate!’s Uganda program](#) participants, four years after the intervention, exhibited higher levels of secondary education completion rates in relation to the comparison group. Another set of results from Colombia showed [long-term educational benefits of the national Youth in Action \(YIA\) program](#). This program from the 2000s provided disadvantaged urban youth 3 months of technical and non-cognitive life skills training, combined with a three-month apprenticeship and a small daily stipend to cover transport and other costs. Eleven years later, YIA participants (selected through a randomized lottery) had increased their formal tertiary education more than non-participants. Moreover, relatives of trainees completed more formal schooling as a result of the program.
- **Girls’ and womens’ empowerment:** Participants of the Uganda Educate! program also exhibited higher levels of female empowerment such as “delayed family formation, less risky [sexual] behavior, shifts in social norms, and reductions in intimate partner violence.”<sup>14</sup>
- **Violence prevention:** [Research from the Philippines](#) suggests that soft skills development interventions, when combined with other contextually appropriate positive youth development and employment supports, result in positive changes in youth’s perceptions of violence, resilience, and perceptions of community and government. Other program experiences suggest that soft skills may not be the silver bullet to preventing political violence: while the [Uganda program](#), for example, did see reductions in intimate partner violence, it did not see impacts on trust in institutions or increased community engagement. Meanwhile, a [USAID/Mauritania program evaluation](#) offers important insights for soft skills programs that aim to target youth who are at risk of participating in organized violence: “Future projects that focus so keenly on specific groups of individuals must rely on clear, detailed evidence, or shift to serve a larger audience with a thinner package of services.”<sup>15</sup> Other evidence briefs in this [learning series](#) will offer greater detail on the evidence around youth and violence prevention.
- **Resilience to economic shocks:** Findings from the same [Philippines research](#) indicated that an employability and soft skills training program may have had a soothing effect on possible external shocks that were causing negative employment trends overall. The Rwanda RCT (mentioned above)<sup>16</sup> found that the control group suffered far greater losses in assets—more than half the value of their assets compared to at midline—compared to those who had received soft skills and entrepreneurship training and support.



## IMPLICATIONS

While it’s impossible to make universal conclusions from this wide body of evidence, the research presents a strong case for the effectiveness of soft skills instruction. Youth gain soft skills especially when the intervention involves a sufficient program duration and is led by high-quality instructors. What actually constitutes a “sufficient” level of instruction for adolescents and young adults, and what are the characteristics of “high quality” instruction for this target population, are areas for further exploration. For example, the State of the Evidence Update: Soft Skills Measurement brief in this [learning series](#) discusses the importance of contextually-appropriate measurement approaches, as well as a safe, inclusive learning environment, for the development of youth’s soft skills.

This brief raises a second question—one related to entrepreneurship and earnings. When combined with other forms of support—technical training, work-based learning, business coaching, employment services—soft skills instruction may directly contribute to lasting economic and other sectoral outcomes. But the results to date have been mixed. This may be a worthwhile learning question for USAID in future research learning efforts: does a combination of skills development and tailored follow-on support for young entrepreneurs lead to better employment-related outcomes?

<sup>14</sup> Innovations for Poverty Action. “[Soft Skills and Entrepreneurship Training for Secondary School Students in Uganda](#).”

<sup>15</sup> Giuliano Sarr, Karla et al. (2019). [Empowering Mauritanian Youth through Education and Self-Improvement \(EMELI\) Final Performance Evaluation](#).

<sup>16</sup> McIntosh & Zeitlin (unpublished draft dated March 2022).

And are the less costly, scalable forms of support (e.g. online/phone-based mentoring or peer-based accompaniment models) as comparably effective as more intensive forms of support?

A final area of future exploration is the interaction of gender, soft skills development, and employment. Some studies featured in this brief observed different outcomes for men versus women, but offered relatively thin explanations for those differences.<sup>17</sup> The USAID SEL systematic review also found that girls in acute crises may even experience negative effects of soft skills training programs due to safety or more systemic education and employment barriers. A thorough triangulation of these results with qualitative research on gender dynamics in education and employment, and across different contexts, may shed light on this topic.

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<sup>17</sup> While earlier evidence suggests that women typically benefit more from soft skills and employment support programs, the studies featured here found that men benefited more than women in the short-term in DR, Jamaica, and Colombia, but with those effects tending to dissipate over time.