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STATE OF THE EVIDENCE UPDATE:

ARE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS EFFECTIVE AT PREVENTING VIOLENCE?

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

After four years of 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, the Agency consulted 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 brief contributes to two of the Learning Agenda Questions: (1) To what extent are workforce development programs effective at preventing youth from engaging in gang-related violence or violent extremist groups? and (2) What works at improving workforce/livelihoods outcomes for youth in conflict and crisis settings?*

⚙ INTRODUCTION

Based on the relationships among violence, youth, and employment, USAID and other donors often leverage youth workforce development (YWD) programs as a way to curb or prevent youth participation in group-based violence, including political violence, violent extremism, gangs, and other forms of organized violence.[i] While most young people do not become involved in group-based violence, the majority of those who are involved are young people. YWD programs that target youth's interest in improving employability are seen as a useful platform for improving young people's abilities to manage other factors, such as poverty, political instability, and conflict, that may make them vulnerable to engaging in violence. In conflict-affected countries or countries with high rates of violence, YWD programs recognize that youth need to establish or reestablish positive social networks, understand and manage their emotions, learn to manage and address internal and environmental stressors, and become more future-oriented. There is also growing recognition that the same factors that improve employability may also provide youth with the skills to stay safe and avoid becoming involved in violence.

To date, evidence on the effects of YWD programs on violence prevention is mixed and differs depending on the context (fragile, low income versus middle income, type of violence) and YWD program components (vocational skills, soft skills, psychosocial supports). To address the limitations of the evidence base for the effects of YWD on violence, this brief disaggregates the common components of typical YWD programs (e.g., vocational training, soft skills training,

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[i] This brief focuses on group-based violence (political violence, violent extremism, gangs, and other forms of organized violence). While there is growing evidence about how YWD may affect forms of sexual and gender-based violence, that evidence is beyond the scope of this brief.

relationship building), reviews the evidence for each component, and disaggregates by the type of violence.[ii] This approach can help program designers and implementers be more deliberate about choosing components when designing their overall YWD intervention. This evidence brief ends with recommendations for those researching and implementing YWD in a range of contexts where violence is a concern.

> ### What contributes to mixed results?
> - Effects of vocational skills training on employment are weaker in conflict-affected and fragile contexts than in more stable contexts,[1, 2] translating into more limited effects on violence in the former.[3]
> - The combination of and types of activities in YWD programs and environmental factors within YWD program contexts differ enough that effects of these programs on violence are also mixed (activities are often not specified in enough detail to be replicated).[4, 5]
> - The nature of violence is often not specified and how violence is measured varies (e.g., incidence of violence, violent intent, antisocial behaviors).
> - While there are commonalities across various types of violent groups (e.g., social incentives and camaraderie),[6] overall political violence, including violent extremism, tends to be primarily motivated by grievances and can be ideologically based; crime is largely financially motivated.

How YWD Can Reduce Violence: The initial hope for many YWD programs was that they could reduce violence through improving employment, given the correlations between unemployment and violence.[7, 8, 9, 10] However, the growing evidence base on why young people become involved in violence and what works to prevent them from joining violent groups has led to a growing recognition that there are various pathways for how YWD may be designed to prevent violence. These include:

- **In contexts where financial incentives are the primary motivator of violence, YWD programs that increase employment opportunities may reduce the ability of armed actors to recruit through economic incentives.** This was a main theory behind the employment-violence connection for many years, based on observational research. This theory of change holds up most strongly in cases where economic incentives are the main motivation for violence, such as financial benefits accrued via crime or payments received for being a mercenary. For example, in post–civil war Liberia, an agricultural program that provided ex-fighters with vocational training, life skills, and equipment or cash reduced participants' interest in becoming mercenaries in neighboring conflicts.[11] Similarly, in Papua New Guinea, a YWD program for out-of-school youth reduced aggressive behavior, and those who participated were less likely to have friends involved in crime.[12] Building on work that shows jobs programs reduce youth participation in violent crime in urban areas in the United States,[13, 14] there is also evidence that YWD deters crime and violence in the Latin America and Caribbean region.[15, 16] However, compared to the situations described above, where engagement in violence is largely economically motivated, the applicability of this theory of change tends to be weaker when the motivation for violence is largely political or ideological, as in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Philippines, and Uganda.[17, 18]

- **In contexts where injustice is the primary motivator, YWD programs that address grievances by providing youth with services they need can reduce engagement in or support for political violence.** Young people often become involved in political violence, including violent extremism, because of injustices they witness or experience.[19, 20] Consequently, YWD programs that have the strongest effect on reducing participation in political violence appear to do so by addressing grievances through improvements in government performance,

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[ii] In the rest of this brief, when using the term *YWD*, it refers to a combined intervention of vocational and soft skills training, such as time management, negotiation, leadership, communication, relationship-building, etc. Due to the nature of this brief, it is not possible to detail exactly which combination of soft skills were included in the cited evaluation. For more details about the specifics of the intervention, please see the relevant citations.

whether perceived or actual. For example, in Afghanistan, a combination of cash and vocational training held in government schools improved employment marginally, but reduced support for violence more significantly. While this was an economic program, the reduction in support for violence was related to an increased perception that the government was being responsive, rather than the increases in income or employment.[21] In India, a cash-for-work program reduced violent incidents by Maoist insurgents; this effect was strongest in areas where government performance was higher.[22] Both of these studies illustrate how governments can use a specific form of service provision, in this case workforce development, to reduce grievances or to positively improve perceptions of government.

- **YWD programs that include soft skills development and psychological supports help young people learn to manage anger and impulsive behavior, reducing engagement in violence, particularly crime.** A 10-year follow-up on a randomized control trial in Liberia found at-risk men who received cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and CBT plus an unconditional cash grant were about half as likely as the control group to engage in various antisocial behaviors, including robbery and street fights, with the greatest impacts for those who received CBT plus cash.[23, 24] This model is currently being tested in Chicago with youth at risk for joining gangs and the initial results show reduced participation in violence.[25] A recent review of educational programs and their effects on various forms of violence found that the soft skills components of the YWD program improved emotional regulation, which is a correlate of violence.[26] However, similar to the theory of change about employment and violence, the strongest evidence for the relationship among YWD, soft skills, and violence reduction is related to crime rather than political violence.

- **YWD increases future orientation, reducing engagement in violence.** Future orientation is related to reduced participation in multiple forms of violence.[27] Both the vocational training and soft skills components of YWD contribute to future-oriented behavior. For example, a vocational training program for hosts and refugees in Lebanon and Jordan found that, at least for refugees, it increased optimism for the future and prosocial behaviors toward the host community.[28] In Monrovia, the CBT intervention led to more future-oriented behavior among participants, which was one potential explanation for the reduction in crime.[29, 30] However, a concern with implementing YWD programs in conflict and fragile environments is that they create expectations of job prospects that remain unfulfilled, as some migrants and refugees may not have the right to legally work in their context or lack the required certifications needed to access education or workforce development programs.[31,32]

- **In contexts with a history of intergroup conflict, YWD programs can create opportunities for contact, improving social cohesion and diversifying relationships, and may reduce the risk of violence.** YWD programs can intentionally bring people together where there is a history of intergroup conflict (this is the main theory underlying the USAID People-2-People fund).[iii] This contact reduces stereotypes and prejudices and increases social cohesion,[33, 34] which will, in turn, reduce the risk of violence emerging or reemerging.[35] For example, in northern Nigeria, Muslim and Christian youth participated in a computer training program. Participants in mixed classes were more generous with those from other religions than participants in same-religion classes,[36] and unpublished results indicate that these effects last longer with deeper contact.

⚙ RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND LEARNING

- **Design evaluations to understand how various combinations of activities affect both employability and violence.** A challenge in assessing the evidence base of YWD programs on violence is that YWD programs include multiple components. This causes two related problems. The first is not knowing whether mixed results are due to the components that were included in the design of the YWD program or the context. The second is the difficulty of knowing the reason for an effect, if a program shows one. By finding ways to gradually layer in components, programs can identify the isolated, additive, and interactive effects of each component through

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iii It is often difficult to measure the effects of contact programs directly on violence outcomes because it is often implemented in places where there are low levels of violence (e.g., post-conflict situations).

evaluation, which will better inform program design in a more diverse set of contexts and improve cost-effectiveness. This is what the multifaceted Ultra Poor Graduation Program is currently doing.[iv]

- **Incorporate indicators related to violence prevention in evaluations.** One reason there is relatively scarce evidence about whether YWD programs reduce violence is that few evaluations incorporate a violence measure.[37] Violence could be measured more directly in places with high rates of violence by asking participants direct questions or using advancements in micro-level big data, including cell phone data or social media. However, in many cases, USAID is trying to prevent violence before it occurs. In those cases, examining violence rates will not be fruitful. However, using clear proxies, such as measuring prosocial behavior, behavioral intentions, attitudes, and perceptions can help identify whether the program is addressing the correlates of violence.

⚙ RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAMS

- **When the goal of a YWD program is to prevent violence while increasing employability, conduct a conflict analysis to understand the drivers of violence and explicitly map how the program will address those drivers.** While YWD programs typically undertake conflict analyses in contexts where conflict and violence are endemic, there are a few key questions to consider when designing any YWD program. These include: *Is this largely a situation of crime, where financial incentives are strong, or is this a situation of political violence, where grievances are often the primary motivation? How do violent groups, whether gangs or violent extremist groups, recruit? What are the divides within the target implementation area? How do people from the different sides come together, if they do?* USAID has a number of analytical tools that incorporate these questions, including the [Rapid Education and Risk Analysis Toolkit](#), the [Conflict Assessment Framework: Application Guide](#), and the [Crime and Violence Prevention Field Guide](#).

- **Once the drivers of violence in a particular context are identified, consider some of the strategies identified above to directly address violence-prevention goals.** For example, vocational training programs may be effective in addressing economic drivers of violence, while programs that promote social cohesion may help to reduce intergroup tensions. Across contexts, programs that build soft skills and provide psychological supports may help improve emotional regulation and optimism for the future. Finally, when YWD programs aim to reduce political violence and grievances, evidence suggests partnering with governments may be an effective way to illustrate their role in helping youth receive needed services.

- **When designing programming and determining gender targets, consider the direct and indirect roles young men and women play in violence and conflict:** Currently, little is known about how YWD programs affect young women's participation in violence. While women do become directly involved in violence, they often fill support roles in both gangs[38] and VE groups.[39, 40] Therefore, traditional measures may take note of their participation.[41] There is also a tension between maintaining the 50 percent women-to-men participant targets that many programs require and short-term results in reducing and preventing violence, because in many contexts young men are the primary participants in violence. Program designers need to recognize this potential trade-off and adjust targets accordingly.

[iv] The Ultra-Poor Graduation, initially implemented by BRAC, is a multi-faceted anti-poverty program that includes training, asset transfer, health promotion, saving promotion and cash. The program has been replicated in seven countries. While the effects are strong, there remains questions whether each element is needed to produce results. The researchers examined with other asset transfer or savings promotion had had comparable effects to the full model. Even when factoring in those additional costs of the full model, it is more cost-effective to provide participants with the full model. For more, see A. Banerjee, D. Karlan, R. Osei, H. Trachtman, and C. Udry, "Unpacking a Multi-faceted Program to Build Sustainable Income for the Very Poor," *Journal of Development Economics* 155 (2022): 102781.

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