

NOTES YOUTH DEVELOPMENT



Youth In Post-Conflict Settings

Youth development is an emerging focus in World Bank work across many sectors, yet much remains to be learned. This issue of Youth Development Notes examines the unique challenges confronting youth living in post-conflict settings: demobilization, reintegration, employment generation, emergency education, as well as voice, inclusion and community participation. The note highlights lessons from the literature and from the field on how to facilitate the simultaneous transitions that youth face, from conflict and childhood, to peace and adulthood.



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Today's youth (15–24) constitute the largest cohort ever to enter the transition to adulthood. Nearly 90% live in developing countries and the challenges they face—low quality education, lack of marketable skills, high rates of unemployment, crime, early pregnancy, social exclusion, and the highest rates of new HIV/AIDS infections—are costly to themselves and to society at large. Client demand for policy advice on how to tap the enormous potential of youth is large and growing. This series aims to share research findings and lessons from the field to address these important cross-sectoral topics.

A Simultaneous Transition: from Conflict and Childhood, to Peace and Adulthood

Few attempts have been made to mainstream youth¹ (and gender) in post-conflict reconstruction. Youth interventions tend to be small-scale and are rarely scaled up. Youth ministries or agencies tend to be marginalized, often mixing a range of concerns (e.g., youth, gender, culture, sports), or they are off-shoot agencies with miniscule budgets. Donors, in turn, often bypass these agencies in favor of discussing reconstruction with traditionally more powerful ministries such as public works, education, health and agriculture. Beyond paying lip service to the importance of youth (“youth are the future”) and noting the risks to peace and stability posed by large numbers of idle and disaffected youth, there is little effective, multi-sectoral, sustained and adequately funded youth programming in most post-conflict settings. Employment promotion, especially targeting youth, rarely figures prominently, if at all, in post-conflict reconstruction agendas.

Yet, in post-conflict settings youth face a dual and complex transition. The life stages preceding adulthood are characterized by transitions that are complex and challenging during peace time. Conflict exacerbates this transition by breaking down social norms and cultural practices that guide this transition, exposing youth to appeals to violence by societal leaders, disrupting education systems and employment opportunities, and, for many youth, promoting a sense of identity based on the exertion of power through violence. Youth in conflict settings thus must also navigate the complex transition from combatant in, or victim of, conflict to being a civilian and productive member of society.

The gender dimension tends to disappear in youth programming, especially in post-conflict settings. The term youth is most commonly associated with male youths rather than females, who may simply be considered “young women.” It is comparatively easier for girls to be regarded as women when they become sexually active and mothers. In many societies, the stage of youth is longer and more visible for young males than for young females. This difference in visibility is exacerbated in post-conflict settings. While there is a vast literature on the violence perpetrated against women and girls, young women tend

“We have to de-mine people’s minds as well as our land.”

— Paulo, 24, Angola
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to disappear in youth programming, most likely because they are perceived as less of a threat to peace.

Emerging Lessons from the Literature on Youth in Post-Conflict Settings

Although in recent years there has been considerable work on education and conflict, there is comparatively little operationally relevant literature on youth programming in conflict settings. Much of the writing on youth and conflict tends to be overtly negative, focusing on the dangers posed by disaffected youth (e.g., the negative connotations of the “youth bulge”) or to consider youth as at-risk. Youth programming and interventions tend to be small-scale and suffer from a dearth of systematic and methodologically sound evaluation of outcomes and impact. Despite these shortcomings, the literature suggests some tentative lessons and good practices. These are presented below organized into five overlapping areas: demobilization and reintegration; employment and livelihoods; emergency education; education in post-conflict; and voice, inclusion and community participation. An overarching lesson is that the needs of youth can only be addressed through a multisectoral approach.

1. Demobilization and Reintegration of Underage Ex-Combatants

During demobilization underage ex-combatants should be cantoned or held in special reception centers separate from adults, but for as little time as possible. Young ex-combatants should be separated from military authorities to prevent re-recruitment, retribution, and abuse. The stay in centers should be as short as possible to avoid stigmatizing and marginalizing underage combatants. Family and community links should be emphasized as part of the transition to civilian life. The needs of girls who participated in armed forces are often neglected and need special attention in demobilization and reintegration programs.

1. The UN defines youth as 15–24 year olds. Individuals 15–18 are also included in the legal definition of children, according to international treaties. Many conflicts create a generation of “lost youth”, so a more conceptual definition of youth as the transition time from child to adult is more appropriate in these settings. In Sierra Leone, the official definition of youth refers to the age group 15–35 in order to encompass the lost youth who are currently 25–35. A context-specific definition is important for post-conflict targeting and policy formulation.



Reintegration of underage soldiers should emphasize: family reunification, psychosocial support and education, and economic opportunity. Experience shows that psychosocial approaches, based on family, community, cultural norms and traditions are more beneficial than Western-derived trauma assistance interventions. Psychosocial support, reinforced by the education system can assist adolescents re-establish their identities from soldier to civilian. Education and economic opportunities must be individually determined and include a focus on family livelihood needs.

Reintegration programs must ensure a balance between the need to resume education and earn income. Although underage combatants consistently express a desire to resume formal education after conflict, their livelihood needs must also be taken into account. To the extent possible, income generation interventions should run parallel with (not in lieu of) formal education programs. In some cases, it may be possible to provide “catch-up” classes, accelerated degree or equivalency education programs, and special schools for underage ex-combatants, but these approaches are often constrained by lack of capacity and resources.

The number of underage combatants in any conflict is relatively small. While this group faces complex reintegration issues, concern with their plight should not come at the expense of broader youth populations, who also face trauma and unmet needs caused by conflict. Community-based approaches that focus on community needs and livelihoods are often the first point of entry in post-conflict recovery. There has been little effort, however, to consider how community-based approaches can adopt a youth focus.

2. Employment Generation and Livelihoods in the Post-Conflict Context

Approaches to employment and livelihoods should capitalize on what exists in the communities. The current deficit-focused approach to assessing needs can overemphasize what is lacking in the communities, and overlook what already exists and can be built on. A comprehensive mapping of the livelihoods, assets and resources of affected communities, including youth, should be a starting point.²

Youth employment and skills training programs have limited impact. International experience, especially in Africa, suggests a number of reasons: limited scale and

geographical coverage; supply driven and mismatch with market demands; lack of diversification and market saturation; and lack of differentiation in program design to meet the needs of heterogeneous youth. Many youths, especially in urban areas, are small entrepreneurs in the informal sector. The challenge therefore is to recognize that many youth already have incipient entrepreneurial skills and to find ways to develop such skills.

Labor-intensive infrastructure reconstruction can quickly improve livelihoods and inject cash into decapitalized post-conflict communities. These programs have generally fallen into two categories: job-creation and labor-intensive infrastructure projects. Evolving good practice in post-conflict settings suggests it is more appropriate to have all infrastructure works regarded and designed as employment-creation projects with job-creation targets as primary objectives. Few efforts have been made to specifically target youth and these programs often by-pass women. A contextualized analysis of post-conflict conditions at the community level can help determine the extent to which youth should be targeted rather than (or coupled with) household heads, and ways in which women can participate.

3. Emergency Education

The nature of modern conflicts makes it extremely difficult to use conventional distinctions between the emergency (or humanitarian) and the reconstruction or development phases. Consequently, aid budgets should be flexible and, while education is a development activity, it should not be excluded from emergency budgets and programs. Education reconstruction should avoid a sharp distinction between an emergency phase and a reconstruction phase. Emergency education should be supported where it exists and expanded where it does not. Sinclair’s Principles of Emergency Education are a good starting point, applicable to both emergencies and the reconstruction phase (World Bank 2005, p.31).

4. Education in Post-Conflict Reconstruction and as Conflict Prevention

Education that helps to build social cohesion and stronger resilience to conflict, and does not contribute to a relapse into violence is critical for post-conflict reconstruction. The curriculum is key to managing diversity in education, and textbooks are often more influential than

2. Such mapping exercise is part of ILO’s Local Economic Development (LED) approach in post-war settings.



official curriculum documents. Curriculum and textbook reform, however, is more effective if done gradually and based on a national vision or consensus.

Teachers are the most critical resource in education reconstruction, but in early post-conflict there is a severe shortage of qualified teachers coupled with an oversupply of under- or un-qualified teachers. Limited evidence suggests that catch-up teacher training programs that are linked to materials production (e.g., as part of gradual curriculum reform) have a greater impact on teaching practice, particularly when there is follow-up support.

Psychosocial support to help students recover from conflict-related trauma is often part of post-conflict education programs. One of the strongest arguments for the quick resumption of schooling is that it helps to re-establish a sense of normality that helps children and youth deal with psychosocial trauma. Do not forget the teachers, they too may be traumatized. Psychosocial interventions need to be integrated across sectors and government structures, including education, health, social protection and local administrations.

5. Voice, Inclusion and Community Participation

Ensuring voice and inclusion of youth is important in general youth programming, but even more so in post-conflict settings. The most common experience of youth in post-conflict settings is one of alienation and exclu-

sion. The lack of access to education and employment opportunities greatly exacerbated by conflict leave most youth feeling marginalized at a time when, for many youth, involvement in conflict has created a new sense of empowerment. Exclusion also extends to political marginalization and lack of participation in decision-making—in their own education and in broader political processes. Including and empowering youth to influence what happens inside schools and in the design of youth programs is important to address the feeling of exclusion and create greater youth ownership in programs designed to benefit them. At the same time, the process of consulting youth creates a reciprocal obligation on project designers and policy-makers to effectively take into account youth views.

Inclusive and broadly targeted programs are preferable to narrowly targeted interventions. The lack of programs for youth who have resisted joining rebel groups or gangs, or who have been victims of their violence, can create feelings of alienation and perceptions that those responsible for the violence are being rewarded.

Involve communities. During most conflict situations communities take on some of the education responsibilities the state is unable to fulfill. Reconstruction efforts should build on this community involvement, both to quickly re-establish education services but also as an opportunity to devolve greater responsibility for education access and outcomes to parents and communities.³

Recommended reading

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- Verhey, B. 2002. "Child Soldiers: Prevention, Demobilization and Reintegration." *Conflict Prevention & Reconstruction Dissemination Note*, No. 3. Washington, DC: World Bank.
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3. The oft-referenced EDUCO model in El Salvador is the most prominent example of community empowerment in rebuilding education after conflict.

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