



# Youth employment & citizenship: problematifying theories of change

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## About this report

The K4D Emerging Issues report series highlights research and emerging evidence to policy-makers to help inform new policies and programmatic approaches. K4D staff researchers work with thematic experts and DFID to identify where new or emerging research can inform and influence policy. This report is based on eight days of desk-based research, which largely entailed the reviewing of meta-analysis reports of existing interventions in the field of youth employment. It builds on other research carried out within the IDS Youth Employment and Politics theme.

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# 1. Overview

In recent years, funding for youth employment interventions has rapidly increased. However, there is limited to no evidence that interventions that build skills and knowledge lead to sustained employment and increased earnings. There is also no evidence that youth employment interventions have positive impact on peace and stability, or can lead to youth empowerment in a broader sense. This calls for revisiting the dominant assumptions and theories of change that underpin existing interventions. This Emerging Issues report is based on a review of existing meta-analysis studies on the impact of youth employment interventions as well as qualitative research on the experiences of youth. It argues for more clarity of purpose of different youth interventions and to diversify theories of change to be responsive to different political and economic contexts. Existing theories of change can be enhanced by adopting ideas and approaches for strengthening youth active citizenship.

The current world population is the youngest it has ever been with 1.8 billion people in the 10–24 age group. The figures have spurred enthusiasm about the potential demographic dividend that will possibly accelerate economic growth. However, almost 43% of the global youth labour workforce is either unemployed or working but still living in poverty, which means there may not be a demographic dividend. This realisation has driven interventions that seek to get large numbers of youth into formal employment or become productive citizens in other ways. At the same time, large youth populations are presented as a ‘ticking time bomb’. Un/underemployed youth are considered a major security risk, especially in urban areas, and more recently, unemployed and disaffected youth have become associated with youth recruitment to extremist groups. It is thus not surprising that youth employment interventions have gained immense popularity in the last two decades and that they are needed to serve economic as well as security purposes, such as countering violent extremism.

The outcomes of a number of recently undertaken impact evaluations send a clear message to policy makers that they need to revisit assumptions and develop better theories of change for their interventions:

- There is hardly any evidence that youth employment interventions that seek to improve the **supply-side of labour markets** by offering skills training have positive results. Instead of creating new jobs, they move some youth to the front of the employment queue at the expense of others. None of the interventions are considered cost effective.
- Youth employment interventions that seek to improve the **demand-side of labour markets** by removing structural constraints to the expansion of firms have limited effect, and broader process of industrialisation can produce risky, insecure, and low-paid jobs.
- There is hardly any evidence that supply-side focused youth employment interventions can have a positive impact on **peace and stability**. They are based on an assumed direct and linear relationship between youth un/under-employment and instability; an assumption that has been proven false.

Existing critiques point at the dearth of empirical evidence, particularly the lack of a gendered analysis of the impact of interventions. This is due to the lack of rigorous design for impact evaluations for the majority of interventions. Most supply-side interventions have a similar design, regardless of the highly diverse political and economic contexts in which they are implemented, even in Fragile and Conflict Settings (FCAS). ‘Employment’ and ‘empowerment’ are often used interchangeably, and ‘peace’ is an assumed spill-over effect, which has produced inadequate theories of change.

In order to enhance programme design, this Emerging Issues report underscores that:

- At the very least, theories of change need to be refined and attuned to different contexts, both in terms of economic development and political conditions.
- There is a need to rethink theories of change altogether in order to mitigate negative effects of (neo)liberal approaches that may reproduce and exacerbate existing inequalities and create insecure, risky jobs.
- Adopting a youth citizenship approach to improve youth employment interventions may offer a viable route to designing new theories of change which focus on building youth's civic and political capacities to negotiate labour rights and conditions.
- In FCAS, youth employment interventions need to be designed to respond to challenging contextual factors, even if the desired outcome is 'just' youth employment and not peace. Factors that matter include the extent to which employment and livelihood opportunities are enmeshed with political power, the extent to which opportunities are distributed through clientelist networks, the extent to which economic opportunities are part of grievances over horizontal inequalities, and how 'militarised masculinities' may be shaped by un/under-employment.
- If the desired outcome is peace, and if a conflict analysis shows that youth grievances are part of the conflict dynamics, then youth-specific approaches are justified. In FCAS, youth exclusion rather than youth unemployment is a major grievance, which links to grievances over corruption and the ways in which economic opportunities are distributed. This indicates that here, too, youth citizenship approaches are required in addition to youth employment interventions.

## 2. Background

The current world population is the youngest it has ever been with 1.8 billion people in the 10–24 age group. Globally, about 500 million people aged 15–29 are unemployed, underemployed or working in insecure jobs, which translates to almost 43% of the global youth labour workforce either being unemployed or working but still living in poverty (Goldin, Hobson, Glick, Lundberg, & Puerto, 2015; ILO, 2015), which poses a major constraint on the potential of the demographic dividend to accelerate economic growth. This issue has garnered considerable attention among policy actors (e.g. Goldin et al., 2015; ILO, 2012; OECD, 2013). Supply-side interventions that offer business skills and entrepreneurship skills development constitute the dominant approach, often in combination with some loan or small grant. For instance, the World Bank group and its recipient governments invested nearly \$9 billion in over 90 skills training projects between 2002 and 2012, with an average programme costing \$100 million (Twose, 2015); and around 4.5 million people have participated in the ILO's Start & Improve Your Business programme (Blattman & Ralston, 2015).

Another major reason for the popularity of youth employment interventions is the dominant notion that youth employment is an important way to mitigate violence, despite the overwhelming evidence that there is no direct, linear relationship between youth unemployment and their participation in violence (Cramer, 2010; Dowd, 2017; Justino, 2018). Indeed many youth employment interventions are supported from peacebuilding funds. With the adoption of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth Peace and Security these types of interventions may receive further attention.

Support to youth also figures prominently in UK's bilateral aid. In 2016, DFID launched a Youth Agenda (DFID, 2016) and the DFID Economic Development Strategy, published in 2017, prioritises youth alongside women and girls (DFID, 2017, pp. 7-8). The strategy emphasises economic transformation and job creation as key to achieving inclusive growth and sustainable poverty reduction, and that job creation and skills training will be part of DFID funding in fragile

states, including for refugees and displaced populations (DFID, 2017, p.25)<sup>1</sup>. A review of a number of DFID country portfolios in 2017 showed that – up to that point – few programmes were specifically designed to address the exclusion of women and girls, youth or marginalised groups, while the more recent programmes show some increased focus on the economic empowerment of *women* (ICAI, 2017).

In recent years, a number of meta-analysis studies have been undertaken that should temper the enthusiasm for supply-side interventions: evidence suggests that few projects have produced sustained employment and/or increased earnings (Blattman & Ralston, 2015; Fox & Kaul, 2017). Currently, as policy actors are becoming more aware of the shortcomings of supply-side interventions, efforts are underway to shift the attention to work more comprehensively and bridge the gap between supply-side and demand-side approaches. However, emerging evidence shows that even these efforts may not produce secure, safe or desirable jobs (Blattman & Dercon, 2016). At the same time, there is mounting evidence that the premise on which youth employment interventions in FCAS has been based, i.e. that unemployed youth are a threat to stability and need jobs to be peaceful, is false and that youth employment interventions have no spill-over effect on peace (Brück, Ferguson, Izzzi, & Stojetz, 2016).

At the heart of the problem is the dearth of data and evidence, especially from rigorous impact evaluations conducted over longer time frames (Blattman & Ralston, 2015). More important, however, is the lack of well-thought through theories of change for different interventions. As this Emerging Issues report indicates, many youth employment interventions claim to have impact on empowerment and peace, but these are assumed spill-over effects of employment. The exact pathways through which interventions have these effects are not elaborated.

This Emerging Issues report outlines the critiques of youth employment interventions. It is based on a review of recent meta-analysis studies and some qualitative research. In the final section the report offers further pointers to problematise and enhance theories of change for programmes that support youth in their own right, rather than seeing youth employment as a vehicle for empowerment and peace.

### 3. Evidence on youth employment interventions

This section reviews the existing evidence for the impact of interventions that aim to improve the supply-side of labour markets through offering skills training and those that try to stimulate the demand-side of labour by reducing or removing constraints to recruiting wage workers.

#### Improving the supply-side of labour markets

Supply-side interventions usually entail a form of education and (vocational) training, and entrepreneurship promotion, which aims to equip young people with the skills they need to enter the labour market and find jobs, or to start and expand their own businesses through which they ultimately create jobs for others. In recent years, a number of meta-studies using impact evaluations have been conducted. Studies that found some positive results in terms of achieving employment and increasing earnings were mainly from OECD countries (Kluve et al., 2016), which do not necessarily reflect the conditions of low- and middle-income countries. Studies from low-income countries (LICs) and middle-income countries (MICs) provide no evidence of positive results.

Firstly, there is a lack of evidence of sustained impact (Blattman & Ralston, 2015; Fox & Kaul, 2017). Secondly, these kinds of interventions have been far from cost-effective (Blattman & Ralston, 2015; Fox & Kaul, 2017). Thirdly, they lack good analysis of the ‘demand-side’ of labour

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<sup>1</sup> Up to 2020, 50% of DFID funds will be spent in fragile states.

markets and pay little attention to the question of which kinds of economic transformations can actually produce formal jobs and paid work for youth (Fox & Kaul, 2017; see also Flynn, Mader, & Oosterom, 2017). Finally, the neoliberal economic underpinnings of these approaches ignore the social and political relationships in which young people are embedded and which shape their actual pathways into labour markets (Flynn et al., 2017). This includes a lack of understanding of the aspirations of young people – what they actually want – assuming that they are all happy with any kind of work that pays, even a little (Blattman & Dercon, 2016).

**Table 1: Assumptions and theories of change for youth employment interventions**

| <b>Intervention</b>                                       | <b>Assumptions</b>   |
|---|--|
| <b>Supply-side interventions</b>                          | <p>Promote skills and facilitate access to loans and capital</p> <p>The business climate is adequate and jobs are available, but there is an inadequate supply of labour.</p> <p>The business climate is adequate and jobs are available, but youth are not qualified for these and there is a skills mismatch.</p> <p>The optimal size of an existing business could be higher if the businessmen/women had more/better human capital and ‘soft skills’.</p> <p>A business is operating below optimal size because of constraints on access to capital.</p> |
| <b>Demand-side stimulus e.g. cash for work programmes</b> | <p>There is not enough demand for low-skilled labour, and there are large numbers of underemployed poor who are willing to work even for a low wage.</p> <p>In settings that are post-conflict or post-crisis, the economy needs to be reignited</p>   |
| <b>Demand-side interventions at structural level</b>      | <p>Promote structural transformation that does not reflect jobless growth but increases the demand for labour.</p> <p>The supply of youth labour is adequate, including their level of skills, but the business climate needs to improve in order to generate more jobs and opportunities for youth</p> <p>Private sector development and investment in new industries generate jobs for youth through the growth of small, medium and large firms.</p> <p>Facing a generic lack of opportunities youth are happy to take on any kind of paid work.</p>      |

Source: based on Blattman and Dercon (2016); Blattman and Ralston (2015); Fox and Kaul (2017, p. 26)

Looking more closely at different types of supply-side interventions, such as business skills training and vocational training, existing studies have produced rather serious critiques:

### **Entrepreneurship and business training**

Entrepreneurship and business skills are the most common intervention. However, the length of the training; quality of training and trainers; extent of post-training mentoring; and whether participants receive a grant or a loan can vary. Some interventions have done a market analysis

to see which sectors are likely to grow and absorb businesses, but many have not. Many interventions lack a strategy for rigorous impact evaluation, especially over the longer-term.

- Evidence shows that most training programmes had little impact on business profits or on poverty (Blattman & Ralston, 2015).
- Training programmes that aim to improve youth's employability or help in the search for employment have had limited effects and two-thirds had no effect at all (Fox & Kaul, 2017).
- The more effective programmes combine many different activities, and these are generally not cost-effective. However, even the most effective ones cannot be scaled up (Fox & Kaul, 2017).
- The best results were in middle-income countries, but were implemented at small scale and success rate is likely to decrease when the intervention is scaled up (Fox & Kaul, 2017).
- Even when immediate results are good, these tend to disappear over the medium- and long-term (Blattman & Ralston, 2015; Card, Kluve & Weber, 2015; Fox & Kaul, 2017; Kluve et al., 2016).

### **Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)**

These interventions offer skills training, sometimes in combination with internships with firms. In some cases, TVET providers may maintain relationships with a select group of firms and employers and think through which sectors are likely to provide jobs for youth and the nature of the demand for labour in such sectors.

- A recent and serious line of critique is that interventions that train youth for wage jobs are largely exercising 'job displacement' (Fox & Kaul, 2017) as no new jobs are created. They simply shift some youth into positions that would otherwise have been taken by other youth.
- Since training programmes push some youth to the front of the 'employment queue' and displace others, for the less fortunate youth TVET can actually have negative impacts and create frustration (Fox & Kaul, 2017).
- TVET has only shown some positive results for women, but seldom for men, in terms of increasing an individual's earnings, although these effects are often not significant (Blattman & Ralston, 2015).
- TVET is usually not cost-effective, even when employment was achieved (Blattman & Ralston, 2015).
- There is high prevalence of drop-outs, prompting questions about the desirability of the kind of jobs youth participants are being prepared for, or structural constraints among poorer households to enable a young person to stay enrolled.
- Combining skill-building and TVET with bigger capital investments might generate higher returns, but the evidence for this is mixed. The impacts of programmes like this need further long-term testing (Cho & Honorati, 2014).

### **Capital interventions**

These interventions offer capital to the (ultra) poor in the form of cash, livestock and tools in combination with some form of training.

- Among the interventions reviewed by Blattman and Ralston (2015), capital investment interventions are considered to have more positive results. They help people to diversify their portfolios and profitability and underline the importance of training alongside the capital injection itself.
- There is some evidence of positive results even in FCAS. Given the difficulties of job creation and income diversification in FCAS, this type of intervention may produce the best outcome in these settings (Blattman & Ralston, 2015).

## Interventions to stimulate the demand-side of the labour market

Fox and Kaul (2017) argue that labour markets and the structure of employment opportunities in low-income countries (LICs) reflect the pace of economic and structural transformation. Countries need to increase investment in the private sector in order to increase wage employment (Glick, Huang, & Mejia, 2015; Kumar, 2017), but this is only likely to occur at a slow pace. Interventions that focus on the demand-side of labour markets try to remove constraints to business expansion, for instance through wage subsidies. Microfinance programmes seek to remove constraints on access to capital (Blattman & Ralston, 2015). State-subsidised cash-for-work programmes also stimulate the demand for labour and are more common in middle-income countries. They usually offer a basic income to the very poor who are willing to work at low wages, and should be considered as 'safety net programmes' rather than employment programmes (Blattman & Ralston, 2015). In some post-crisis or post-disaster contexts, temporary cash-for-work programmes are used to inject cash into the economy. All in all, very little research has been conducted on how these might produce jobs *for youth*. Given the population demographics of most LICs and MICs, job creation for youth is considered an indirect effect.

- Kluge et al. (2016) found that wage subsidies were more likely to have positive outcomes in middle-income rather than high-income countries, while there is still a relative evidence gap on LICs.
- An experimental study in South Africa, which has a relatively large formal sector, found that young beneficiaries were likely to remain employed for up to two years after receiving the subsidies, but that the number of beneficiaries was small (Betheman and Khan, 2015).
- Other studies of wage subsidies to private sector firms have shown mixed results: some were entirely ineffective and workers lost their jobs as soon as the subsidy ended; and in some countries they prolonged employment somewhat (Fox & Kaul, 2017).
- Microfinance or microcredit programmes can help people to address short-term needs, but high interest rates make borrowing risky for borrowers and have locked people into debt rather than helped them move out of poverty (Mader, 2015). If returns to capital are moderate (like in FCAS) then this is not the best option for many people (Blattman & Ralston, 2015).
- There is little to no counterfactual-based evidence of the effects of cash-for-work programmes in LICs (Blattman & Ralston, 2015). Given the scale of these interventions the lack of evidence is striking.
- Importantly, youth employment debates have focused primarily on private sector development of a kind that one finds largely in urban settings. The majority of youth in LICs and MICs lives in rural areas, but the demand for labour in the agricultural sector has not been part of the mainstream debate on youth employment (see Yeboah, 2018).

## Youth aspirations and the quality of work

One form of structural transformation involves LICs investing in and developing their own industries instead of solely producing raw materials. One randomised control trial conducted in Ethiopia showed unexpected results (Blattman & Dercon, 2016). Ethiopia has emerging industries that are

meant to generate many low-skilled and some-skilled positions. Researchers collaborated with five firms (a beverage producer, a horticulture farm, a flower farm, a shoe factory, and a garment factory) across four regions who were recruiting low-skilled workers at entry-level. A total of 947 job applicants were randomly assigned to a formal employment treatment group, self-employment treatment group, or a control group that received no assistance. Those who were hired worked on the production side of the five firms, which entailed a working week of 50-60 hours and a daily wage of US \$1.00-1.50. The self-employment group received five days of business training, mentoring and a US \$300 grant. The control group did not receive anything. All participants were surveyed at the start and again in months 11 and 13.

The findings showed that of those employed in the firms, a third had left within a month and at the end of the study only 33% of those initially hired were still working. Importantly, many had left without having found alternative employment. Those who were still working in the firms had no higher average earnings than those who were part of the control group. The long hours, meagre pay and unhealthy or unsafe working conditions motivated many to leave. Moreover, working in agriculture or small businesses offered more flexibility and a similar level of income. The participants who took part in business training had slightly higher weekly earnings, on average, than those who were part of the control group. Also, they were less likely to work as farm labourers or industrial workers than those in the control group (Blattman & Dercon, 2016).

There is also evidence of youth refusing to participate in *supply-side interventions*, such as the Skills for Employability programme in Pakistan, where 95% of the poor households who were given the opportunity to participate refused to do so (Blattman & Ralston, 2015, p. 10). Even when the daily allowance was increased and training sites made more accessible, the uptake did not exceed 25% (Blattman & Ralston, 2015). These examples demonstrate that employment interventions must consider the aspirations of youth and how young people weigh costs and benefits of the opportunities on offer, as well as conditions that enable or constrain individuals to take part.

### **The issue of cost effectiveness**

Note that supply-side programmes typically cost between \$1,000 and \$2,000 per participant and do not pass a cost-benefit test, especially if the interventions have only some positive impact on only few participants. As an example, to be cost-effective, an intervention needs to lead to an increase in the weekly earnings of a woman from \$10 to \$30 for at least 18 months – an outcome hardly ever observed in evaluations (Blattman & Ralston, 2015). Fox and Kaul (2017) find that the most effective skill-building-for-employability programmes cost 2 to 5 times the yearly per capita income of a country, while still failing to create any new jobs.

Any notion of ‘impact’, however, needs further unpacking. While value-for-money arguments are central to donor operations, the question of what kind of impact and for whom is often addressed insufficiently. Quantitative impact studies sometimes leave little room for pursuing the different ways in which interventions have had impact on someone’s life. They ask to what extent a business, employment and increase in earnings has been sustained, and when the answer is to no extent the intervention is deemed unsuccessful. However, many youth have portfolios of livelihood activities and it is common that they choose to engage in some of them temporarily in order to, for instance, fund the start up a different activity, go back to school, or pay for the education of a sibling. Such outcomes may be valuable but are difficult to measure and quantify. Since most interventions lack a long-term impact analysis, whether quantitative or qualitative; therefore the sustained effects of training and opportunities and the diverse ways in which they were used later in life are not captured.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, recent meta-reviews send a clear message to donors and governments to rethink skill-building interventions that seek to enhance the supply-side of labour markets and address

an assumed skills mismatch. If a government or donor prefers to work on the supply-side, then programmes that combine training with grants are more promising, but evidence is still needed to demonstrate their long-term impact. Western donors are increasingly aware of the need to shift attention to demand-side interventions, but policy approaches and efforts to develop jobs for youth are lagging behind. Fox and Kaul (2017) highlight the different conditions for LICs and MICs and argue that employment interventions need to sit within the level and pace of economic transformation. This offers a starting point for better theories of change. However, interventions that focus on the demand-side tend to ignore youth aspirations, and the evidence available suggests that generating low-income and insecure jobs is both risky and undesirable. Generation of decent jobs requires greater attention to the political economy and state-business relations that underlie particular development trajectories (Ayele, Mader & Thorpe, 2016). These findings call for complementary approaches that, on one hand, support youth in developing the capacities to negotiate challenging labour conditions and, on the other hand, support youth to access the institutional channels and policy spaces where these are negotiated. Section 6 elaborates more on this point.

## 4. Evidence on youth economic empowerment interventions

Economic empowerment interventions seek to improve the access of marginalised groups to economic assets and resources in order to enhance their social and political standing. More than employment interventions, these combined interventions articulate the desire to address inequalities between groups. Economic empowerment interventions are based on the premise that improved economic conditions spill over and cause an increase to the social and political agency of individuals and also change norms and behaviours of others. This argument has already been particularly well developed for women's economic empowerment programmes.

In brief, economic empowerment is assumed to lead to a redistribution of power and resources and enhanced political agency through the improvement of economic conditions, such as earnings and assets (Cheema, 2017). Economic empowerment programmes often have the same design as the supply-side interventions discussed above; however, women's economic empowerment programmes often also integrate mentoring and activities that help women understand and (re)negotiate gender norms and roles. Very often economic empowerment interventions claim to be empowering by merely improving an individual's financial or economic position.

Theories of change of economic empowerment usually refer to the causes of inequality, in material and social terms. For women's economic empowerment, the theory of change tends to emphasise that a stronger economic position leads to more autonomy, recognition and respect within the household, as well as in society and the market, and that this in turn increases the decision-making power of a woman. For economists, an increase in women's earnings increases their bargaining power (Cheema, 2017). Some interventions reason that, by extension, this may result into increased safety for women and more household investment in girls' education (Cheema, 2017).

As with employment interventions, few economic empowerment interventions include a rigorous impact evaluation, and there is little meta-analysis of different impact evaluations. Cheema (2017) distinguishes three types of interventions: microfinance; skills training; and business development services and asset transfers. The latter include land reforms and so-called 'ultra-poor programmes' that combine transfers of cash or livestock with training. Specifically, there is no evidence for the assumed spill-over effect of an increase in employment or earnings on social and political agency and changes in social norms (Cheema, 2017). Typically, evaluations measure the extent to which economic conditions improved but not the empowerment effect. This means that the evidence base is still very small. Cheema (2017, p. 14) finds that:

- Interventions that seek to improve market access for deprived citizens by reducing transaction costs for finance, labour and enterprise have weak and inconsistent impact; and they have no effect on women's decision-making autonomy in the household.
- Asset redistribution interventions have a large impact on the economic conditions of beneficiaries, as their access to and control over assets increases, and there is some evidence for beneficiaries' increased civic and political agency. However, the evidence base is still limited.
- Ultra-poor programmes have no impact on women's decision-making autonomy within the household.
- Some studies show that increases in women's earnings led to retaliatory actions by their spouses and an increase in domestic violence, thus having a disempowering effect.
- Overall, interventions that have some successful impact on economic conditions have no empowerment effect.

## Conclusion

As shown clearly above, many interventions assume that an improvement in economic conditions leads to empowerment. The theory of change for youth economic empowerment misses the pathways for how shifts in norms and behaviours are to be achieved, which can result in programme designs that lack crucial components. Fox and Kaul (2017) and Cheema (2017) argue, country context strongly matters in the nature of the constraints to economic empowerment to which an intervention should respond. In order to move from employment to empowerment it is necessary to respond to social norms and formal and informal institutions, because they are part of the context, or conditions, in which an intervention takes place. Programme design needs to be based on an analysis of this institutional context which can then be integrated into a theory of change and the strategies and activities that respond to the social dynamics and constraints that hamper empowerment.

## 5. Evidence on youth employment and peace

DFID's economic development strategy states that economic development can help address the causes of conflict, but that furthering employment and economic development in these kind of settings remains challenging (DFID, 2017). **FCAS** are defined as having weak institutions, being at high risk of political instability, experiencing or emerging from violent conflict having unstable policy environments and being vulnerable to external shocks (Cheema, 2017, p. 26; Blattman & Ralston, 2015). FCAS are further defined by the lack of state capacity to keep a monopoly over violence, few constraints over the power and control over executives and the enmeshing of political and economic elite, resulting in a situation in which access to economic resources, power, and security is mediated through powerful groups (Cheema, 2017; North et al., 2007). Important constraints to economic development in FCAS is: the limited rule of law which creates uncertainty over property ownership; low state capacity to help foster and enabling environment for employment creation; and the negative impact of violent conflict on human capital (Blattman & Ralston, 2015). Physical and human capital are likely to have low returns due to uncertainty and the risk of losing assets again, and thus supply-side programmes are unlikely to improve employment and raise incomes (Blattman & Ralston, 2015).

The issue of youth unemployment has become prominent in debates about development approaches in FCAS after a number of influential studies showed a correlation between a country's instability and 'youth bulges' – and particularly large numbers of unemployed youth (Cincotta, 2008; Urdal, 2006). This produced specific advice to focus on youth employment:

In order to avoid instability and violence in particular, the focus [of donors and governments] should be on improving economic opportunities for young people,

particularly by providing employment or educational opportunities for youth in periods of economic decline. (Urdal, 2012, p. 9)

More recently, concerns have grown over the recruitment of young people into terrorist groups, which was thought to be at least partly caused by youth disenfranchisement over the lack of employment opportunities (Williams, 2016). However, there is now mounting evidence that two important assumptions that have informed and produced both policy discourses and major interventions are fundamentally flawed, or, at best, incomplete.

### **Myth 1: Youth unemployment generates violent conflict**

A fairly straightforward, but nonetheless valid, critique on this assumption is that a) even in instable settings the majority of youth remains peaceful; and b) if un/underemployed youth are inclined to engage in acts of violence, the majority of LICs in Africa, Asia and the Middle-East would currently experience active violent conflict (Sommers, 2015; UN Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development, 2016); and especially cities, home to large un- and underemployed youth populations, would be highly volatile places (Sommers, 2015; UN Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development, 2016). In addition to this broad critique, a number of papers have reviewed the existing evidence for the assumed relationship between youth unemployment and violence.

- There is mixed and even contradictory evidence in relation to a presumed linear, causal relationship between youth unemployment and violence (Cramer, 2010; Dowd, 2017). This is exacerbated by diverging definitions of youth, violence and work and the paucity of data in FCAS. Each category needs to be specified in order to make evidence-based judgement on the precise relationship between them (Dowd, 2017).
- National-level data on un/underemployment are inadequate to explain *which* young people participate in exactly *which kind* of violence (e.g. crime, gangs, low-intensity violence, or high-intensity violence like insurgencies), especially as certain conflicts and forms of violence remain highly localised within countries.
- Studies that disaggregate types of violence find evidence for a relationship between youth unemployment and anti-government protest; however, they do not escalate into national-level unrest (Azeng & Yogo, 2015).
- A study in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Philippines found no evidence of a correlation between unemployment levels and participation in insurgent attacks at the district level (Berman, Felter, Shapiro & Callen, 2011). New evidence of quantitative research at district-level in Nepal, Mexico, Afghanistan and Colombia also contradicts the dominant theory and finds that districts that have larger youth populations are less likely to experience conflict (Justino, 2018).
- The dominant economic theory on the role of youth in violence emphasises the material and economic opportunities and gains of participation in violence. Employment would offer an alternative opportunity. However, whereas there is much knowledge about the multifaceted causes and dimensions of conflict and peace, when it comes to thinking about youth and violence, this complexity has been reduced to largely economic factors (Dowd, 2017; Keen, 2012).

If the causes of conflict have in some cases been misunderstood and reduced to youth unemployment, then interventions that use this as the point of departure may miss the mark. This takes us to the next assumption, which has influenced a large number of interventions in FCAS.

### **Myth 2: Youth employment interventions have positive impact on social cohesion, stability and/or peace**

Concerns over the assumed correlation between youth unemployment and instability prompted the international development community to make significant investments in youth employment programmes as part of peacebuilding interventions. Whereas 'peace' is often understood in the

aggregate at societal level, employment interventions target individuals, and therefore, the pathways from individual employment through to peace need to be clearly outlined (Brück, Ferguson, Izzi, & Stojetz, 2016). However, in a review of 432 programmes, Brück et al. (2016) found that very few programmes explicitly elaborate how employment-peacebuilding connections are meant to work: they lack a detailed theory of change.

The existing evidence has produced a damaging critique of approaches that link employment to peace, which calls for policy actors to reconsider the design of their interventions. Blattman and Ralston (2015) explicitly state that:

'Links from labor market and entrepreneurship interventions to actual employment, and from employment to stability are based first on faith, second on theory, and last on evidence. Not surprisingly, most of these faith-based employment programs have failed to deliver jobs, poverty relief or stability, *especially standard interventions such as skills training and microfinance* [emphasis added].' (p. i)

With regards to the impact of interventions in FCAS studies include that:

- There is no evidence that youth employment interventions have a 'spill-over effect' on the reduction of violence (Brück et al., 2016). Most programmes lack explicit mechanisms through which employment is supposed to effect peace. By implication, monitoring and evaluation exercises of individual programmes largely fail to capture impact on peace, and therefore the evidence for impact of youth employment programmes on peace remains thin, or non-existent.
- Interventions that target high-risk young males with a combination capital or assets with cognitive behavioural therapy can dissuade them from engaging in *criminal violence* (Blattman, Jamison & Sheridan, 2015) if criminal violence was part of a livelihood portfolio. Paid work then reduces the need to be involved in crime. However, impact on earnings and self-employment was not sustained due to criminal losses, as all men lived and worked in areas with high crime rates.
- Blattman et al. (2015) caution that these interventions are unlikely to have impact on youth who are motivated to join violent extremist groups, as unemployment and material incentives are seldom the determining factor for joining. The limited evidence on individuals who have joined extremist groups shows that they are not the most marginalised, uneducated or unemployed youth (Blattman et al., 2015).
- There is limited but emerging evidence that capital grants in FCAS can stimulate some self-employment and earnings cost-effectively. They are, however, rarely used and positive results emerge mainly in the *least affected* localities (Blattman & Ralston, 2015), and most have not been evaluated for their effects on conflict.

Further critique of approaches in FCAS that prioritise youth employment highlight that:

- They reflect a vision of youth as productive citizens who need to further economic development without offering them opportunities to take part and influence governance (Oosterom, 2018).
- Typically, youth employment interventions do not integrate the challenging, political and institutional context factors as part of the design (Brück et al., 2016; Cheema, 2017).
- Interventions assume that the cause of violent conflict can be reduced to un/underemployment or access to economic opportunities despite existing knowledge about the multiple, interacting causes of conflict (Stewart, 2008). Improving one of the multiple factors that drive conflict, even if achieved, is unlikely to affect peace (Brücke et al., 2016).
- They disregard the 'do no harm' principle. Programmes are often implemented in contexts where economic resources, including funded employment programmes, may be

used to further entrench power of specific groups or elites, increase clientelism and reinforce inequalities (Brück et al., 2016; Oosterom, 2017; Sommers, 2015).

- While Blattman and Ralston (2015) and Blattman and Annan (2016) argue that targeting 'at risk' males may reduce the likelihood of their participation in some (but not all) forms of violence, Ebiede's (2017) study on ex-combatant youth in the Niger Delta of Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire suggests that programmes offering economic opportunities to ex-combatants divided youth and had an adverse effect by creating the impression that 'fighting pays' – thus ultimately increasing the risks of participation in violence (Ebiede, 2017).

## Conclusion

The conventional assumption that youth unemployment is a security threat is no longer a valid starting point from which to justify youth employment programmes. This does not mean that youth in FCAS do not want jobs and livelihoods. However, as in relatively stable settings, the conventional approaches do not have the desired impact, and they risk playing into the local dynamics that sustain conflict. At the very least, youth employment programmes in FCAS need to respond to conflict sensitivity and the political factors that may interfere with programme implementation.

If an intervention does aim to contribute to peace it must specify a) how/through which mechanisms it can do so; and b) integrate an economic intervention as part of a broader strategy or package of interventions that address different factors driving conflict, such as inter-group relations and (perceived) inequalities, multiple forms of exclusion, weak governance, security and elite entrenchment. Obviously, this is beyond the scope of a single employment programme and more comprehensive approaches cannot be limited to youth only. If the aim is to support youth living in FCAS then other issues apart from livelihood will matter to them, such as exclusion. Any youth livelihood intervention needs to respond to the political dynamics that may interfere with the programme.

## 6. Missing from the narrative: youth citizenship

It has been suggested that practice needs to shift to diagnostic-based analysis and design of programmes and construct better, more realistic theories of change that reflect the complexity of a context, especially in places affected by violence and conflict. Further, interventions need to be accompanied by rigorous impact studies (Blattman & Ralston, 2015).

Existing theories of change (and as a consequence, programme designs) miss essential mechanisms and steps:

- 'Youth employment' and 'youth's economic empowerment' are used interchangeably, with empowerment often reduced to employment. As a consequence, many theories of change give little attention to change in norms, behaviours and power relations.
- While the observation that the demand for labour needs to grow may be correct, most theories of change ignore youth aspirations and the essential civic capacities they require to negotiate labour conditions.
- Certain youth employment interventions explicitly aim to contribute to peace and stability. All too often, however, the 'peace dividend' is assumed to be a 'spill-over effect'. Theories of change do not articulate pathways that link the different activities to actual impact on peace and stability and pay little attention to other youth grievances, such as corruption inequalities in economic opportunities and experiences of substantive citizenship.

This section provides a number of pointers for problematising and diversifying theories of change. This should particularly help to resolve the missing pathways in existing theories of change, while also addressing the blind spot of youth aspirations in existing employment interventions.

## Negotiating decent work: a citizenship capacity

As outlined above, there is emerging and growing awareness that programmes and policies need to place a greater emphasis on economic transformation and stimulating the demand-side of labour markets. This comes with two important risks:

- Neoliberal, market-based approaches to resolve youth un/underemployment produce the challenges and risks highlighted in studies mentioned above, in relation to labour conditions in firms (Blattman & Dercon, 2016): risks of exploitation and bonded labour (Chari et al., 2017); exploitation through predatory financial arrangements for entrepreneurship (Mader, 2013), and gendered experiences and risks pertaining to wage labour, such as exposure to sexual harassment (Goncalvez, 2014; Naved, Rahman, Willan, Jewkes & Gibbs, 2018).
- The neoliberal approach that asks individuals to become more entrepreneurial requires them to be resilient to market changes, e.g. able to respond to change and bear the associated risks of and always act fully self-responsibly (DeJaeghere & Baxter, 2014; Szeman, 2015). Having some earnings per se does not prompt a shift in power as the review of economic empowerment interventions demonstrates (Cheema, 2017), and merely getting youth into work does not make them less vulnerable.

It is well-acknowledged that (neo)liberal approaches reproduce existing inequalities (see Scott-Villiers & Oosterom, 2016; Gaventa & Marturano, 2016). Youth employment interventions, even if these are enhanced with an improved understanding of how demand-side interventions can create jobs for youth, cannot be expected to fix the drivers of youth marginalisation. Alternative frameworks have been set out to at least mitigate potential negative impacts of market-based approaches and help achieve substantive empowerment in terms of shifting power to the advantage of more marginalised youth and emphasise future wellbeing (DeJaeghere & Baxter, 2014). Cheema's (2017) review justifies an approach that combines capital transfers and/or asset-based approaches with approaches that seek to promote young people's social and political capacities to negotiate with state and corporate actors; and specifically work with men and women to protect the security and wellbeing of female workers and self-employed businesswomen.

**Taking a youth citizenship approach is a systemic approach to supporting youth in their own right, rather than instrumentally, to achieve economic development and peace. It sees youth inequality as the problem rather than youth unemployment and prioritises meaningful, decent work alongside voice, agency and representation.**

A **youth citizenship approach** fits with a 'Leave no one behind' paradigm because it takes the underlying power dynamics that cause inequalities into account, and prompts an analysis of the specific power and gender dynamics that exclude youth. A youth citizenship approach recognises that grievances over lack of decent livelihoods and access to economic opportunities are intimately linked to power inequalities (Gaventa & Marturano, 2016).

If the objective of an intervention is to improve youth employment it could still adopt a youth citizenship approach.<sup>2</sup> Any **theory of change** would thus incorporate an analysis of power dynamics, social norms and structures that determine access to (decent) work as *well* as existing

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<sup>2</sup> If the objective is, however, to improve the position of youth in society altogether, an intervention would give more weight to social and political dimensions other than those pertaining to the youth employment situation, but it is beyond the scope of this briefing paper to discuss this in detail.

labour conditions. Evidently, an intervention would then simultaneously address economic *and* socio-political constraints to the participation of youth in the labour market *and* barriers to improving working conditions, at multiple levels.

In practice, a youth citizenship approach to enhancing employment and livelihoods requires:

- Supporting youth to develop **civic and political capacities** as part of supply-side interventions:  
Given the (modest) evidence that capital transfers combined with skills training may have some effect on employment, there is room for integrating programme strategies that build citizenship capacities.
- Analysing and addressing **social norms and relationships** in which youth are embedded:  
This requires recognising the social hierarchies that exist between those who are considered 'youth' and adults, including in the workspace and in governance institutions, in addition to gender dynamics.
- Improving demand-side of labour based on the assessment of youth aspirations, in conjunction with the institutional policy context that safeguards **labour rights and conditions**.
- Supporting youth participation in institutions relevant to youth employment:  
If any framework exists for youth participation at all, they are usually limited to National Youth Councils or quota for youth councillors that have little teeth and are under-resourced (Oosterom, 2018) and usually have no influence in the design and decision-making of 'hard' economic policies such as labour laws. A much-needed complementary approach to demand-side stimulation of labour would therefore be youth engagement in government institutions and policy frameworks that explicitly deal with labour law and markets and accountability and oversight institutions.
- A **multi-level approach** that targets both government and youth:  
At the national level: negotiation over labour laws and policies, and institutional constraints;  
At the sub-national level: strengthening collective organising capacities of market and worker associations;  
At the local and firm-level: direct involvement in decision-making over conditions of the workplace and devising and using accountability mechanisms where firms and employers do not comply with labour law.
- Given the aid architecture of many donor agencies, developing this approach would typically require internal collaboration between the divisions that focus on youth and social development and those that focus on economic development.

In FCAS it is more important to adapt the approach to the economic and political context, as fractures in experience of substantive citizenship are likely to be even worse in FCAS (Oosterom, Wignall & Wilson, 2017). Factors that matter are the extent to which employment and livelihood opportunities are enmeshed with political power; the extent to which opportunities are distributed through clientelist networks; the extent to which economic opportunities are part of grievances over horizontal inequalities; and how 'militarised masculinities' may be shaped by un/under-employment (Dowd, 2017).

Fox and Kaul (2017) propose that strategies used in Positive Youth Development (PYD) programmes may be useful to develop youth's non-cognitive, transferable skills in order to improve supply-side employment interventions. This is not the same as taking a youth citizenship approach as it sees youth unemployment as a problem in isolation from drivers that cause youth exclusion from access to economic opportunities. PYD should not be used to help enhance youth

employability, but rather their ability to negotiate labour conditions, and to hold state and corporate actors to account in case of labour rights violations.

Currently, there is a lack of evidence of Youth Empowerment Programmes (YEP) and PYD programmes for countries in the global south, and specifically in relation to employment (Morton & Montgomery, 2012; Rankin et al., 2015; Alvarado et al., 2017).<sup>3</sup>

- A number of PYD programmes implemented in the global south have shown some positive results for addressing gender norms; and PYD programmes focusing on sexual and reproductive health have shown a positive impact on practices and behaviours (Alvarado et al., 2017).
- YEPs have shown some positive results in Western settings, but there is a dearth of evidence for the global south (Morton & Montgomery, 2012).

While there is important learning from existing YEP and PYD interventions that can be used to design youth employment interventions that use a youth citizenship approach, any new type of intervention needs to come up with a design for a rigorous impact evaluation.

## Supporting youth in fragile and conflict-affected settings

Youth in FCAS face a broad range of challenges, and the majority navigate and respond to their challenging conditions by trying very hard to get by (Sommers, 2011, 2015). In different FCAS, youth can become a politicised social category, even if only a minority ends up being mobilised, because both state and non-state actors target youth (LeBas, 2006; Oosterom, 2016, 2018). There is also evidence that shows that states facing youth bulges are more repressive towards youth in order to pre-empt oppositional protests (Nordas & Davenport, 2013). Pointing out that few studies have asked youth themselves about their concerns, scholars emphasise the forms of political and social marginalisation that youth experience and their sense of injustice about the distribution of economic resources (Honwana, 2012; Sommers, 2015; Mutisi, 2012; Podder, 2015). Where youth *did* actively taken part in urban protests, they did not simply protest joblessness but also government malpractice and corruption that has stalled economic development and caused a lack of opportunities (Honwana, 2012). This indicates that youth employment alone cannot help resolve youth disenfranchisement, and that approaches that enhance youth citizenship need to be equally pursued.

**If the objective is to support youth living in FCAS and strengthen their position in society in general, then youth employment must be part of a wider set of interventions that also address youth citizenship.**

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security offers new impetus to designing interventions that address the interaction between the different factors that generate conflict. While the convention prioritises youth employment, it also promotes their political participation and thus could potentially address the major imbalance in employment and youth participation-related funding (Oosterom, 2018). UNSCR 2250 stresses the right of young people to participate in peacebuilding at all levels of governance, and that their voice should be supported in relevant institutions and interventions. However, a concern is that the UNSCR 2250 agenda might be overtaken by other security agendas like countering violence (Williams, 2016). Nonetheless, UNSCR 2250 may generate international momentum for thinking about young

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<sup>3</sup> Positive Youth Development (PYD) is an approach that emphasises resources and assets, and the development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills of youth, which they need to realise their aspirations and potential and also to engage positively with the world outside, while also recognising that this requires an enabling environment (Alvarado et al., 2017). Youth Empowerment Programmes (YEP) emphasise building self-efficacy and self-esteem, and the ability of youth to take part in decision-making spaces that are usually adult spaces and offer leadership training, mentoring, and supported access to e.g. government structures (Morton & Montgomery, 2012).

people's contributions to peace. Indeed, the progress study on UNSCR 2250 emphasises the need to start understanding the diverse ways in which youth stay out of violence and actively contribute to peace.

It is now well argued that youth employment interventions in FCAS should only be part of a wider strategy and suite of activities in order to promote peace and stability and only if an initial conflict analysis indeed pointed out that youth un/underemployment is part of the underlying conflict dynamics (Brück et al., 2016). Even then, youth un/underemployment is unlikely to be the only grievance that youth have.

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