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How Does Work Feature in Literature on Youth Participation in Violence?

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Caitriona Dowd

Summary

This paper explores the evidence available on the role of work in youth participation in violence, through a study of recent research and evidence in this field. The evidence review considers the role of 'work' broadly, seeking to go beyond restricted definitions of waged and formal sector employment or underemployment. It considers the role of formal and informal work, different forms of work, and the various potential roles – both positive and negative – that work may play in youth participation in violence. The study will also employ a broad definition of 'violence' – considering youth participation in organised, mass-mobilised conflicts; 'radicalised' or 'extremist' violent groups; less formal, criminal violence; and, where relevant, interpersonal violence. The deliberately broad definition of violence facilitates a focused analysis of the evidence and research surrounding the role of work in youth engagement in all forms of violence that constitute a disengagement from a peaceful social order, recognising the interlinkages between multiple and varied outward manifestations of violence (for example, criminal, economic, political and interpersonal violence). The study explores the evidence for the role of work in youth violence participation at the intersection of multiple forms of work, multiple forms of violence, and multiple forms of participation, mapping gaps in existing research and evidence, and opportunities for further research and analysis. Attention will be concentrated on research and evidence produced after 2010, building on the work of Cramer (2010) on unemployment and violence.

Keywords: Youth, violence, conflict, labour, employment, work, evidence.

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1 Introduction

In 2014, 1.2 billion people live in countries that are considered ‘fragile’ (typically, conflict-affected), and a further 800 million in countries with high homicide rates (Blattman and Ralston 2015: 1). A perception of rising global instability, and increasingly interconnected global violence, has given new impetus to donor and research initiatives to understand the conditions under which people participate in violence. One area donors, policymakers and researchers are increasingly exploring to understand the conditions of this violence, is the question of youth involvement. Young people are perceived to be the primary agents of violence in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, and particular attention has been dedicated to the role of unemployment in driving this participation. Prominent researchers have explicitly advised,

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: 9)

National governments have been ardent supporters of this particular framing of the youth–unemployment–conflict nexus: in 2006, Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf equated ‘the level of unemployment and the idleness of our youth’ with potential ‘social disenchantment. For us, employment is synonymous to peace’ (Sirleaf 2006: 3). Key international actors have also echoed these sentiments. In 2014, former US President Barack Obama addressed the UN, in a commitment to ‘expand our programs to support entrepreneurship and civil society, education and youth – because, ultimately, these investments are the best antidote to violence’ (White House 2014).

At the intergovernmental level, the issue of young people and violence is consistently framed in similar terms: according to the UN Office for West Africa, youth unemployment ‘fuels conflict and crime’, making ‘job creation... a key tool for conflict prevention’ (UNOWA 2005). In 2015, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2250 on youth, peace and security, reinforcing the importance of a focus on unemployment in the prevention of violence, and in the youth disengagement and reintegration from violence:

- (2550, 11) ‘*The Security Council* [...] stresses the importance of creating policies for youth that would positively contribute to peacebuilding efforts, including social and economic development, supporting projects designed to grow local economies, and provide youth employment opportunities and vocational training, fostering their education, and promoting youth entrepreneurship and constructive political engagement’;
- (2550, 17, (a)) ‘*The Security Council* [...] encourages [...] evidence-based and gender-sensitive youth employment opportunities, inclusive labour policies, national youth employment action plans in partnership with the private sector, developed in partnership with youth and recognising the interrelated role of education, employment and training in preventing the marginalisation of youth’;
- (2550, 17, (b)) ‘*The Security Council* [...] encourages [...] investment in building young persons’ capabilities and skills to meet labour demands through relevant education opportunities designed in a manner which promotes a culture of peace’; and
- (2550, 17, (c)) ‘*The Security Council* [...] encourages [...] support for youth-led and peacebuilding organisations as partners in youth employment and entrepreneurship programs’.
(UNSC Resolution 2550, 2015)

The resolution is explicitly contextualised against a backdrop of ‘a time when an estimated 600 million young people live in fragile and conflict-affected settings and against the rise of radicalisation and violent extremism, especially among young women and men’ (UN Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth 2015). The UN Executive Director of the UNFPA states that ‘it is imperative for us to invest in young people to fulfil their potential and help achieve peace and security’ (UN Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth 2015).

Characterisations have long proliferated of young, unemployed people as ‘looking for trouble’ (*The Economist* 2011), with particular attention paid to the conditions of un/under-employment which may have given rise to youth participation in violence in West Africa (see Kaplan 1994; Utas 2003). However, these depictions have taken on particular significance in the wake of the Arab Spring, which several analysts and policymakers have linked directly to the issue of youth unemployment.

Policy funding has followed framing: between 2002 and 2012, the World Bank invested an estimated US\$9bn in almost 100 skills training programmes for the poor and unemployed (Blattman and Ralston 2015: 4). Beyond the World Bank alone, it is estimated that over 200 employment creation programmes were implemented in sub-Saharan Africa, and 50 in Southern Asia in the first decade of the twenty-first century (Holmes *et al.* 2013: 23). Individual donors have been particular champions of this approach: in 2012, USAID estimated that it spent at least US\$300m on youth programmes. However, that same estimate pointed to a shortcoming in this prolific spending: USAID concluded that there was insufficient evidence available to allow an evaluation of the impact of these interventions (Mercy Corps 2015: 8).

In fact, rigorous exploration of the relationship between youth unemployment and violence has been hampered by an underlying dearth of data and evidence. Robust assessments of this relationship are limited not only by a paucity of data and statistical capacity in many violence- and conflict-affected countries, but equally by inconsistent, competing and divergent theorisations and operationalisations of – *inter alia* – the concepts of youth, work, un/under-employment, and violence. Available evidence, summarised in this review, points to enormous gaps – both in available data and the capacity to systematically collect it – that serve to seriously qualify claims of a simple, linear relationship between youth unemployment and violence.

Moreover, what evidence is available from more robust studies, suggests that each of these categories need to be theoretically – and operationally – unpacked and further specified in order to make evidence-based and informed judgments on the precise nature of this relationship. The simple fact is that not all youth without work (or without sufficient work) participate in all forms of violence, but a lack of conceptual specificity has hampered empirically grounded advances in the field of understanding when, how, who does, and in what types of violence, and what opportunities this presents for intervention, conflict management and conflict prevention.

What consensus there is on robust relationships, while often limited to individual cases or countries and therefore generalised with caution, suggests that work plays a complex role in young people’s participation in violence, and rarely – if ever – a mono-causal one. Un/under-employment intersects with other forms of social and economic exclusion to create conditions in which some young people are more likely to engage in organised violence and conflict, and only participation lower-intensity and less-organised forms of violence appear to respond positively to economic incentives (such as work creation) alone. Moreover, far too little remains known about:

1. The ways in which different types of young people – too often treated as a single, homogeneous whole – navigate these relationships and incentives;
2. The ways in which different forms of violence respond to different conditions and incentives for young people; and
3. The ways in which work in its multiple forms co-exists alongside participation in violence.

The following review summarises divergent and contested theories of young people, work and violence, before reviewing available evidence on the interrelationship between the three. It concludes with suggestions and opportunities for future research that respond to gaps in this field.

2 Concepts and definitions

The concepts of work, youth and violence are diversely defined and highly contested. Importantly, they are also interlinked and not always easily separable. As Oosterom *et al.* (2016: 5) note,

the nature of the local economy can be deeply political and political actors shape the economy through formal and informal practices, with implications for young people [...] In their pursuit of economic opportunities in contexts of violence, young people are required to navigate the politics of the local economy, and this includes navigating potentially violent political actors.

The need to navigate these fields carefully is all the more sharply delineated in contexts of high-intensity or widespread violence. In these conditions, work opportunities not only provide a means of securing an income, and potentially other forms of social connections and status; but also serve as sites of social practice and identity construction for young people (Oosterom *et al.* 2016: 5). These can be intricately interlinked with economies of violence, and the means of securing safety and protection. In (certain) extreme cases, terminology associated with fighting forces, such as ‘rebel’ may be conceptualised by populations as functionally synonymous with ‘youth’ and ‘marginality’ (see Hoffman 2011: 38), attesting to the ways in which the concepts of work, young people and violence become inextricably interlinked in particular circumstances.

The section below summarises key definitions and conceptualisations of these categories, but it is important to bear in mind the ways in which they overlap, the particular conditions which may render them interrelated, and the implications this has for the nature of the relationship between them.

This review deliberately considers the broader category of ‘work,’ rather than ‘employment’ alone, in an attempt to understand not only the role of formal, waged labour in violence, but also the role of informal work, under-employment, and unpaid labour, in the calculus to participate in violence.

2.1 Work

A clear distinction between formal and informal work is, in any event, often difficult to delineate in the lives of young people in conflict- and violence-affected contexts. In low-income countries, poor households typically engage in a ‘portfolio of work’ (Blattman and Ralston 2015: ii) encompassing ‘mixed livelihoods’ (Maclay and Skelton 2017: 4), rather than holding a single ‘job’ in the conventional sense of the term. Poor people tend to engage in a diverse range of income-generating activities, either simultaneously or at different points

over time, which diversifies risk over multiple income streams. This is particularly true in economies with a large informal sector, where work may typically be irregular, insecure, casual and precarious (Gough *et al.* 2013: 94). Equally, large-scale or high-intensity violence may create constraints in the labour market that make self-employment, rather than waged employment, more common (Ciarli, Kofol and Menon 2015). Together, these factors render unemployment 'an ambiguous notion, which is notoriously difficult to measure' (Izzi 2013: 104; see also Maclay and Skelton 2017 on the example of Liberian unemployment data). As such, attention to this wider range of activity is important for understanding how this suite of activities, and the diverse constellations and combinations it may encompass, feeds into the decision to engage in violence.

Equally, very few people in low-income countries are truly 'unemployed' in the sense that they engage in no work at all: they are much more likely to be 'underemployed' (Blattman and Ralston 2015: 1). Underemployment reflects a condition in which people are economically active, but sub-optimally so, and are either actively seeking more employment opportunities, or would do so if they thought these prospects were realistic. Critically, previous reviews have found that 'underemployment may be as significant as unemployment [for violence], as may be irregular employment' (Cramer 2010: 6).

There is also the issue that the nature of work varies from context to context, and in the lives of different individuals. Work that is exploitative, extractive or dehumanising may have a particular negative effect on social integration, or perceived political legitimacy, for example, and through this, may effect violence. At the same time, work of different kinds may provide benefits to young people beyond tangible, economic income streams alone: work may provide access to social networks and status. Likewise, having no, or insufficient, work may equate to more than simply the loss of income or material poverty, but may correspond to constructions of particular youth identities (Oosterom *et al.* 2016: 7) which in turn may motivate participation in violence.

Concepts and definitions of work concern not only different kinds of different kinds of work, but also how scholars conceptualise work differently. Conceiving of work as a *stage* rather than an *activity*, is prominent in conceptualisations of school-to-work transitions. In this literature, it is the blockage, dysfunction, disruption or other challenges to this transition that account for participation in violence, rather than conceptualising of work as an activity or distraction (see Kurtenbach 2014). This blocked transition results in a status of 'waithood' as a problem for university graduates, whose prospects are disrupted when labour market demands do not match their level of education or training (Kurtenbach 2014: 122; Dhillon and Yousef 2009).

2.2 Youth

Definitions of youth are also extremely diverse. Common approaches include simple age-based definitions; and relying on socially constructed definitions (defined by markers such as marriage, starting a family, dependent to contributor in a household). The latter in particular are likely to differ across context, but may also differ within the same societies, across genders, time, communities and geographies (Frederiksen and Munive 2010).

Definitions and conceptions of youth that are grounded in social constructions and contexts are important for our understanding of youth unemployment and violence. Underpinning much of the research on youth unemployment and violence are two broad, if often implicit, assumptions:

1. Youth disproportionately participate in violence because of a lack of developmental maturity; and/or
2. Youth participate in violence when a large share of youth in the population disrupts the social and age hierarchy and renders older members of society unable to control and discipline more unruly youth (see discussion in Bricker and Foley 2013; and Hudson 1999; Hart, Atkins and Youniss 2005).

In both cases, the precise ways in which youth to adult transitions, and youth identities more broadly, are socially constructed should therefore shape how and why youth engage in violence (see Bricker and Foley 2013, for an overview).

It is also important to recall that youth is an extremely diverse category. Many of the studies reviewed for this paper aggregate youth into a single, homogenous category, only, if at all, disaggregated by gender (typically, referring to 'young men' in a particular age bracket). This results in little or no attention to key patterns of social difference, including urban/rural distinctions; ethnicity, religion, or degree of social inclusion; or educational or other features that often define youth experience. These distinctions are important in the lived experience of youth populations. Therefore, we should be attentive to them in our theories and empirical tests of how work affects 'youth' participation in violence. It is highly likely that work affects different youth in different ways, and subsequently, shapes their (non-)participation in violence in discrete ways. In particular, in contexts of conflict, formal or informal processes of initiation which mark the transition from childhood to adulthood may be disrupted, delayed or transformed (Mercy Corps 2015: 11). As such, developing a consensus around definitions of youth in contexts of conflict and violence can prove particularly problematic.

2.3 Violence

In addition to various definitions of work and youth, violence takes many different forms, and can play different roles in young people's lives and choices. In spite of its centrality to the question of why young people might choose to participate in violence, the concept itself is under-theorised and homogenised in much of the literature. Few studies meaningfully differentiate between different forms of violence; different degrees of participation; and the discrete effects of violence, including in producing contexts in which young people may feel they can actively navigate and negotiate their choice to (not) participate, and those in which choices are much more circumscribed. As Brett and Sprecht (2006: 123) note in the context of violent conflict:

One of the most significant and yet least-considered aspects of this issue in all respects is war itself. Few young people go looking for a war to join; for many, war comes to them and becomes part of their normal environment.

For the purposes of simplification, violence can occur anywhere along a spectrum of highly organised, collective political violence, such as insurgencies and rebellions; to more intermittent or sporadic forms of political violence, such as militia-based violence or vigilante violence, or involvement in group that use terror tactics; to criminal, often gang-related violence, and interpersonal violence, as well as gendered violence. One of the reasons consensus (and associated, robust evidence) on the exact relationship between relationship between youth unemployment and violence has been so elusive, is because violence is such a diverse category. For example, some evidence suggests there is a link between unemployment property crime, but much weaker links to other forms of violent crime, and much more limited data on youth unemployment specifically, and various types of violence (Izzi 2013: 110).

Although this study will consider the evidence linking youth and work to different types of violence as though they are discrete phenomena, it is important to keep several factors in

mind. First, violence rarely occurs in a vacuum, and so these forms of violence are more likely to be interacting with one another and potentially affecting the intensity and course of violence endogenously. Second, evidence suggests that the same individuals, over the course of a lifetime, may be engaged in more than one type of violence, or play different violent 'roles' (for example, moving from rebel groups, to paramilitary or vigilante forces, and/or state militaries) at discrete points and without a simple linear pathway, at least in high-violence contexts (see Dolan 2000). As such, the disaggregation of violence types is, to some degree, artificial, although it provides a useful lens through which to analyse the effect of work on young people's participation in violence of different kinds, and, overall, this comparative lens remains under-employed within the existing literature.

Within this diversity, it is also important to recall that state violence – though almost entirely ignored by the literature – is another form in which young people may engage in, or experience, violence. Most of the research, and almost all policy and development interventions in this field, concern youth engagement in non-state violence (rebel groups, gangs, and so forth). However, youth involvement in state violence may be related to the exercise of power, or aspirations of self-sacrifice (for example, Massing 2007). Additionally, state violence can be viewed from the perspective of structural or cultural violence. In such conditions, the absence of political instability may actually represent a high (and potentially repressive) degree of state control (for example, in Eritrea), which would not be reflected in standard measurements of conflict or violence, but may nevertheless have implications for youth, and be shaped, in turn, by conditions of youth empowerment and political influence. The question of state violence as an aggravating factor is particularly important in counter-insurgency campaigns, or in campaigns in which criminal activity (and its supposed perpetrators, including – writ large – young, unemployed men) is heavily securitised, as in Latin American 'wars on drugs' and 'social cleansing' programmes (Kurtenbach 2014: 129).

In the context of considering the wider *universe* of violence that occurs in a context, it is important to be attentive to violence that may be seen primarily as a form of self-defence, community policing, or as self-preservation and protection. Much of the literature on youth participation in violence (with the exception of research on gang membership) almost entirely ignores the violent contexts in which young people are often drawn into violence. Simplifying assumptions instead present a linear narrative in which young people make a choice between 'idleness,' poverty and unemployment, and participation in violence, but do not ask how and what participation in violence secures young people otherwise – for example, protection for themselves or their wider networks through association with a violent group. In these contexts, the wider violent environment is of critical importance. Irrespective of economic incentives, security challenges such as ensuring one's own safety and protection may override otherwise 'rational' choices to work or migrate for work, if no other means of ensuring safety are available.

In addition to violence taking many different forms, the nature, level and degree of participation in that violence varies. This can depend on both the nature of the group: a rural insurgency in exile, for example, demands greater participation and (arguably), commitment, than participation in an urban-based gang operating in its area of origin. Different types of group, with varying degrees of coordination and organisation, may rely on different motivations and incentives, thereby complicating a simple causal claim about youth, work and violence participation. For example, groups that have direct access to rents or means of financial distribution may attract opportunists, while groups with limited resources may recruit more heavily from among 'activists' or true believers (Weinstein 2006).

Different groups may also require different roles at different levels of participation. Some types of violence – for example, irregular, highly asymmetric warfare, or violent organisations that recruit relying heavily on club goods – appear to be less dependent on economic conditions (Blattman and Ralston 2015: 27). In such contexts, only a small number of

militants may be required to perpetrate large-scale violence, therefore suggesting that general or widespread conditions of unemployment are not necessary.

Similarly, different kinds of groups may provide different opportunities for work *through* participation, pointing to the complex interrelationship between these seemingly linear processes. Violent groups may provide opportunities in relation to work beyond income opportunities – for example, opportunities to develop transferable labour skills beyond manual labour (see Cramer 2010: 21).

Within the same group, there is theoretical reason to believe the motivations of different participants at different levels diverge, alongside some empirical evidence (see Krueger 2008; Krueger and Malecková 2003). This may vary according to an individual's position in a group structure: for example, leaders may have different incentives, motives and objectives as compared to 'foot soldiers'. If true, this suggests very different practical and policy responses to violence for different participants, and where entry points might emerge to address, manage and mitigate violence.

Violence also varies according to its temporal dimensions. Many seminal studies on the causes of conflict rely on conflict onset (i.e. the start of a conflict) as their measure of conflict, rather than – for example – duration, or intensity (see Urdal 2006 for an example explicitly exploring youth populations and conflict onset). This may have theoretical relevance – as it estimates the risk that a conflict may occur in a given country – but its real-world, policy and praxis implications are less clear. Different types of conflict may occur or begin at the same time, with drastically different implications for policy and practice, but models such as these treat all these conflicts as equivalent.

This also feeds into an additional temporal consideration: there is a difference between *starting* an insurgency; participating in violence once under way; protracted violence following conflict. As Cramer (2010: 25) notes,

Once violent conflicts get underway, participation can easily become endogenous to local dynamics of which organization is in control, what agendas of resentment and envy divide people locally, and what experiences of brutalisation by war people have already had.

For example, there is robust evidence that income shocks increase crime and conflict intensity; but very little to suggest they correspond to the outbreak of new conflicts (Blattman and Ralston 2015: 27). The same group may also exhibit different temporal patterns in recruitment over time. Some evidence suggests that groups begin with 'true believers' and gradually, as conflict dynamics themselves come to shape group strategy and priorities, come to include more and more opportunistic or income-motivated individuals (see for example, the case of 'Boko Haram' in Nigeria, NSRP 2015).

Violence participation also entails different geographies. A particularly high-profile policy concern is the 'foreign fighter' phenomenon, whereby (predominantly young) people travel great distances to become members of violent organisations. Elsewhere, however, young people may participate in violence closer to home, at a lower level, or they may become displaced by violence, and as a consequence, then fail to enter the labour market, and *then* participate in violence.

In addition to different motivations for participation, a related question is the relationship between work and support for violence. While not directly related to participation, wider support for terrorism may create an enabling environment in which violence can take place (the concept of '*the sea in which the fish swim*'), whereby populations are less likely to denounce violence to the state, or share information on violent actors with the state

(Blattman and Ralston 2015). Alternatively, support for violence may be a first step on a process of radicalisation and ultimate participation. Both mechanisms suggest the significance of considering the role of work and support for violence (Khalil 2014).

3 Issues of data

In a context of rising youth populations, there is a dominant consensus that youth unemployment can be directly linked to participation in violence, in a linear way (see Cramer 2010 for an overview; also Urdal 2006). However, this consensus has emerged in a context of limited evidence and data on youth, youth work and un/under-employment, and youth participation in violence. According to one systematic evidence review, studies on employment in fragile states typically boast a ‘theoretical rather than empirical bias, with many studies and policy documents being based on the assumption that employment creation will promote poverty reduction and stability’ (Holmes *et al.* 2013: v).

Problems arise at each stage of the research question, and at the intersection of the various factors of work, youth and violence. In the first instance, and affecting all variables, is the scale at which data is collected, and the degree of disaggregation this allows. Violence is typically a localised phenomenon (see Cederman and Gleditsch 2009), but data on work, youth and violence are all much more systematically available at national levels, and with little attention to social categories and other potential ‘horizontal inequalities’ (see discussion of aggregate unemployment figures in Northern Ireland, in Cramer 2010: 19). This can have the effect of obscuring pockets of unemployment, youth marginalisation, or violence, by aggregating these into national averages, with little attention to the causal mechanisms that operate at a highly differentiated level.

Each individual variable also presents unique problems: in the first instance, work, unemployment, and under-employment are all contested, and difficult to operationalise. As discussed above, very few people in low-income countries are ‘unemployed’ in the conventional sense of the word, but the degree to which under-employment is or can be accurately measured in national or otherwise comparable statistics is very limited. Youth engagement in the labour market is particularly difficult to measure and conceptualise, as young people who have been discouraged from looking for work, but are able to work, would be excluded from conventional unemployment figures (Gough *et al.* 2013: 95).

Youth is also contested and difficult to measure, although age-based definitions provide one option that is commonly used by international and national organisations. However, measuring youth in relation to the overall population is an issue of considerable debate. Bricker and Foley (2013) measure not the youth size of the population overall, but its size relative to the total labour force, to produce a ‘youth risk factor’ which they argue side-step some of the data paucity issues that restrict other samples and models. The authors argue that it is the ratio of youth population to the total labour force that exerts economic and social pressure, and is positively correlated with violence. Some authors seek to mitigate the paucity of data through the use of instrumental variables in models testing the effect of youth unemployment on violence (see Azeng and Yogo 2013), but much more progress is needed in this area in order to robustly assess central claims of this literature in a reliable and systematic way.

There is also the question of reporting and capturing violence accurately. There are challenges with accurately gathering reliable, comparable reports of violence that can be analysed systematically over time. This is an issue not only of access (which is particularly problematic in conflict-affected contexts), but also of reporting, biases, and the politicisation of violence reports. This is further complicated by the question of the location of violence.

Many models which seek to disaggregate the locations of violence by geo-coded information, associate that violence with the location in which it occurs. However, violent groups may travel to sites a long distance from their locations of recruitment, in order to target enemies, or particularly high-value targets (see Hegre, Østby and Raleigh 2009).

These factors also all interact: both political violence and un/under-employment data are non-randomly associated with violence itself. In other words, high levels of insecurity produce conditions in which data is more difficult to collect, leading to the generation of samples that are systematically and non-randomly biased in favour of countries with low to moderate levels of violence, or the long-run absence of violence. Consequently, models are undermined by a lack of controls, a lack of baseline data, and a lack of longitudinal data as a result of the restrictions on conducting research in high-violence contexts (Holmes *et al.* 2013: 25). Social relations also intersect to condition not only work conditions, but also the likelihood of reporting violence. As Cramer (2010: 7) summarises, rural women whose husbands were employed in Kerala, India, were significantly less likely to report intimate partner violence than women with unemployed husbands. Meanwhile, in a wider study across India, women who were employed but whose husbands were unemployed were twice as likely to report physical violence than those whose husbands were employed.

There is also a related question of missing variables. Violence and unemployment may be non-randomly associated with an external, missing variable. For example, Krishnan *et al.* (2010) find that in Bangalore 'over two thirds of women who had ever experienced domestic violence reported that their husbands had difficulty finding or keeping a job, as compared to about half of those who had not experienced violence'. However, it is plausible that there is a third, missing, variable that accounts for both inability to hold a job (unemployment) and violence against partners, that is unaccounted for in conventional, linear explanations. Related, is the question of reverse causality, whereby long-run political instability produces high levels of unemployment, and in turn (or in conjunction) predicts future violence, without unemployment *per se* playing a critical role (Azeng and Yogo 2015; Colino 2012).

Relatedly, there is the question of how to control for intersecting, intervening and compounding factors, which may render unemployment a volatile and potentially incendiary status among some individuals/groups, and not among others. For example, past exposure to violence, or psychological factors, that may compound the economic and pecuniary significance of unemployment (Cramer 2010: 8).

The proliferation of donor-funded interventions to support youth work, and through this, violence reduction, has done little to address this data gap. Walton (2010: 1) finds,

both the theoretical and the empirical cases for using youth employment programmes as a stand-alone tool for reducing violent conflict are extremely weak. Donor interventions have been poorly evaluated and evidence of success is usually limited to demonstrating increases in employment levels, with little effort made to assess the impact on conflict.

The result of this has been a growing emphasis on holistic, comprehensive and integrated approaches to violence reduction, which include employment alongside a suite of other interventions. However, this too brings challenges for researchers: even the most ardent proponents of theorists agree that un/under-employment alone is not a singular driver of violence. Consequently, most interventions that facilitate rigorous research rely on a combination of investments (for example, skills training for employment prospects and a cash injection), making the specific role of work in deterring violence more difficult to estimate. This 'shotgun approach [...] may lead to inefficient program components that are costly to deliver' (Blattman and Ralston 2015: 5). The result is a context in which interventions that link labour market interventions to employment, and employment to stability 'are based first on faith, second on theory, and last on evidence' (Blattman and Ralston 2015: ii).

4 Theories and evidence

Generally speaking, research and evidence on the relationship between work, youth and violence falls under two broad categories:

1. Studies that ask what role work – as provided/created in the ‘natural’ economic cycle – plays in participation in violence, violent crime, radicalisation, etc.; and
2. Those that look to assess the efficacy of targeted employment creation programmes/ interventions in reducing violence.

The former tend to rely on macro-theories of conflict onset – for example, ‘greed’ vs ‘grievance’ – premised on (but rarely evidenced by) individual-level cases of participation, motivation and psychology. They typically look to the wider conditions in which violence occurs, and identify probabilistic relationships between large-scale conflict onset, or widespread violent crime, and social and economic conditions including unemployment, extrapolating that these lead to frustrations or other motivations that fuel violent conflict. For example, in his seminal work on the topic, Urdal (2006) finds that countries wherein youth constitute 35 per cent or more of the total population (those characterised by a ‘youth bulge’) are 150 per cent more likely to experience armed conflict than countries with an age structure closer to developed countries, controlling for a range of variables.

These studies, however, suffer from what Cramer (2010: 20) refers as the ‘ecological inference challenge’, whereby even disaggregated data by community ‘does not establish that unemployed people were the main or only participants in organizations using or supporting political violence’. (Blattman and Ralston 2015: 27) refer to this as the ‘unit of analysis’ problem:

We are interested in understanding the individual person’s decision to rebel or commit a crime, or perhaps a group’s ability to recruit, but most of the evidence is at a regional or national level. Income shocks do not just affect a group’s ability to recruit, however. Falling prices or output can affect government revenues or counterinsurgency capacity, both at the national and local level. Thus it’s hard to take the correlation between income shocks and violence as evidence for the ease of recruitment and other opportunity cost accounts of rebellion.

To side-step this aggregation from the individual to the community, researchers need data on individuals directly participating (or with past experience of participating) in violence, which constitutes the latter form of study. These are often based on programmatic evaluations and assessments of the effects of donor or government interventions, such as workfare programmes, skills training and employment generating programmes for ‘high-risk’, ‘vulnerable’, or ‘reformed’ young people. These tend to be conducted in violence-affected countries, areas, communities, or among populations with exposure to and/or experience of violence. However, these present a second methodological risk of selecting on the dependent variable of existing violence participation, or at the very least, exposure, which may bias results. In such cases, research is carried out with, for example, combatants or former combatants who are asked about their motivations, and findings are then generalised to the wider population, when unemployment is almost certainly more widespread (Izzi 2013: 110).

The following section reviews the evidence supporting discrete theories of youth unemployment and its role in violence.

4.1 Economic incentives

Economic theories of the role of youth un/under-employment in violence participation suggest that young people participate in violence in order to satisfy financial and material needs. This view of violence participation, broadly defined, assumes that violence is an occupational choice, and roughly equivalent to other options for securing an income and meeting material needs. This view of 'war as work' is not strictly confined to economic lenses on violence: for example, Hoffman (2011: 34) develops an anthropological and sociopolitical approach in the same framing of 'violence as literal work... war as labor'. Nevertheless, this view remains more prominent within this disciplinary lens, than those in which greater emphasis is placed on violence as a means of enacting social or political change, or meeting social or normative needs (discussed below). Economic theories that place an emphasis on opportunity costs, strictly defined, assume (simplifying) that young people have no alternative use of time (such as full-time employment), and therefore, engage in violence. From an economic perspective, the existence of a large, young and unemployed cohort in the population lowers the cost of recruitment for violent organisations, because organisations need to promise less in exchange for the relatively more abundant free time young people are assumed to have.

At the macro level, Urdal (2012: 2) has found that the existence of a large, young cohort lowers the costs of recruitment into violent organisations. He finds that large youth cohorts alone are positively related to unemployment, by virtue of the larger number of young people available in the labour force; and independently, the size of the youth cohort itself reduces prospects for young people. This approach motivates a large share of aid spending on reducing political violence, postulated on the assumption that employed men are less likely to participate in insurgent violence (Berman *et al.* 2011: 497).

The theorised connection is clear, but the empirical evidence on this relationship is mixed, particularly in relation to applicability to various *types* of violence. For example, several studies propose a direct link between employment opportunities and youth participation in state violence. In their study of young people's choice to participate in armed conflict, Brett and Sprecht (2006: 22) present qualitative interview evidence supporting the hypothesis that limited employment prospects, and through these, economic opportunities, fed into the decision to join the military:

[In the army] you can go out and see the world. You can get life experience, OK... It proves you don't have to go and work in a factory. Doing the same thing day in, day out. Bored, you know. (Stephen, United Kingdom)

The shortest route, the easiest job in the Congo is the army: they are always hiring; above all they are paid. (Albert, Congo-Brazzaville)
(quoted in Brett and Sprecht 2006: 22)

In the wider context of violence research (and by far, the largest portion of the literature does *not* concern state violence), several challenges to the theory have been put forward. For example, the theory of economic incentives, and through these, the role of unemployment, in motivating violence, is based on an assumption that participation in violence (typically referring to large-scale, organised violence such as conflict) is 'a full-time occupation, in the sense that individuals cannot be legitimately employed and active insurgents at the same time.' (Berman *et al.* 2011: 497). However, it is not clear that participation in violence and employment are mutually exclusive, or at least, not for all types of conflict. For instance, Kurtenbach (2014: 129), citing existing empirical studies, finds that 57 per cent of Guatemala's gang members simultaneously work in the 'noncriminal economy'.

Similar evidence has been found in relation to self-reported criminal activity in the United States, and participation in the labour market, leading Blattman and Ralston (2015: 23) to conclude that 'while crime versus legitimate work is often framed as an either/or decision, in fact a poor person's best strategy might be both. Illegitimate activities are just another risky, uncertain occupation to add to one's portfolio of work'. The implications of these findings are twofold: first, they suggest that participation in violence and employment are not mutually exclusive, and can in fact co-exist, at least for some forms of violence. Second, they indicate that while participation in certain forms of violence may be sensitive to changes in the labour market or wages, this may be expected to have the greatest effect on shifting people's 'portfolio' to encompass more non-criminal activity, without succeeding in getting them to 'exit' or abandon criminal violence entirely.

The differentiated effect of work, through economic incentives, on discrete forms of violence appears to be borne out by available data. For example, evidence from the US suggests that increases in unemployment rates are associated with a corresponding increase in the frequency of property crime; but violent crime, by contrast, 'does not vary as systematically with the unemployment rate. To the extent that it does, the explanation consistent with the pure opportunity cost story is that violence is a complement to or by-product of certain forms of crime (such as drug dealing)' (Blattman and Ralston 2015: 28). Similarly, Aaltonen *et al.* (2013) study the effect of unemployment on criminal behaviour in Nordic countries and find no meaningful relationship between unemployment status and violent crime (although they do for property crime). They do find that individuals who commit violent crimes tend on average to have been unemployed for longer, although they do not necessarily commit these crimes while unemployed (Aaltonen *et al.* 2013: 582). The findings support an economic choice theory of the relationship between unemployment and crime, but the results do not demonstrate a clear relationship between unemployment and violent crime, and offer little insight to the demographic (youth) features of this relationship.

With regards to higher-intensity violence, such as organised insurgencies, we might expect the effect of un/under-employment on violence to be more pronounced, particularly as participation in an insurgency may demand a full-time commitment, and therefore render employment and violence participation largely mutually exclusive. Employment creation is a common policy response in post-conflict contexts, through which it is expected to reduce violence by creating labour demand that absorbs ex-combatants, offers legitimate means of securing incomes, and 'reduces incentives which may contribute to instability' (Holmes *et al.* 2013: 6).

There is some evidence to suggest this is effective. A field experiment that sought to reintegrate young men in Liberia after the conflict there provided a mix of agricultural training, capital inputs, and counselling to a treatment group, and compared results to a control group who did not receive the same interventions. The results show that after the programme ended, men who were in the treatment group were more likely to be engaged in farm employment, to have shifted their work away from illicit activities such as mining, and reported reduced interest in mercenary work (after war broke out in neighbouring Ivory Coast, and mercenary recruitment began in Liberia). Specifically, men in the treatment group were 24 per cent less likely than those in the control group to participate in one of 12 direct measures of mercenary recruitment activity, such as talking to a commander, or attending a recruitment meeting (Blattman and Annan 2016). However, consistent with other results above, the programme showed no effect on participation in lower-intensity forms of violence, such as engaging in physical fights or property destruction, even though a dedicated programme counselling component sought to teach methods of non-violent conflict resolution (World Bank 2014). While promising, these findings should be contrasted with analyses that suggest that employment creation programmes and associated benefits (such as training and cash transfer programmes) for former combatants further exacerbate tensions between former combatant and civilian populations. These may 'create the

perception that fighting pays', serving to 'divide youths in post-conflict societies into two basic categories: ex-combatants and others' in ways which may ultimately, at worst, serve to further incentivise (or at least fail to disincentivise) violence participation (Ebiede 2017: 13).

Other quasi-experimental studies have found similar effects, but have emphasised the interactive effect of employment (and income generation) on other conditions of vulnerability, positing a less direct causal pathway between youth, work and violence. For example, making use of the phased roll-out of the Indian National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme to implement a quasi-experimental study, Fetzer (2014) found that this large-scale work programme may have moderated insurgency violence, by providing a means of social insurance and employment in times of need. Specifically, the author found that the work programme moderated the effects of poor rains – otherwise, correlated with the intensity of government-Naxalite violence – concluding that 'one of the key drivers of insurgency can be moderated through the effective introduction and provision of social insurance' (Fetzer 2014: 28). Unfortunately, the study did not disaggregate by age, and therefore offers little insight into the specific dynamics of *youth*, work and violence.

Several authors, however, have challenged these findings, or at least their applicability to other forms of violent conflict. While studies of large-scale and high-intensity conflicts typically restrict their samples to mass insurgencies, other forms of equally destructive and devastating warfare may rely on discrete forms of recruitment and mobilisation. For example, certain forms of irregular warfare (or participation in armed organisations characterised as 'terrorist') may not demand mass participation, instead depending on a small sub-section of the population to inflict damage. Alternatively, they may rely on recruitment from beyond the site of violence alone – for example, from regional countries, and/or international 'foreign fighters'. In such cases, the underlying assumptions that participation in violence is either a low-skill occupation, in which case the creation of mass employment programmes will reduce the number of recruits, or that the supply of labour domestically is a binding constraint on organisations, may not hold.

Available evidence on these dynamics is limited, but one study finds that unemployment is *negatively* associated with violent insurgency levels in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Philippines, in contrast to conventional opportunity cost arguments (Berman *et al.* 2011). The authors argue that this is a function of a similar opportunity cost mechanism, but operationalise this as information theoretic. They contend that because conflict creates a large pool of poor, unemployed people from which the government (or other counterinsurgent forces) can buy information on insurgents, government forces are therefore able to more effectively tackle the insurgency, and violence reduces as a result (Berman *et al.* 2011). Additionally, they argue that measures taken to enhance security (such as checkpoints, building walls, etc.) may have both a negative effect on employment, and a *positive* effect on levels of insurgency. For example, the construction of checkpoints and security barriers may reduce labour movement, trade, and access to markets, thereby indirectly effecting employment. Importantly, however, these findings extrapolate from survey data about specific, individual unemployment, and general levels of insurgency, without tracing a clear line between individual unemployment (or even youth unemployment specifically) and participation in violence; and are not available disaggregated by age or age category.

In line with this, what limited evidence there is available for participation in conventionally-labelled 'terrorism' or 'terrorist groups' has typically failed to demonstrate a robust relationship between unemployment and terrorism, or that 'terrorist perpetrators are more likely than the average person to come from a lower socio-economic background or to be uneducated, unemployed, and economically distressed' (Piazza 2011: 339; see also Piazza 2006; Krueger and Malecková 2003). In addition, there is almost no robust evidence on the relationship, specifically, between unemployment and youth participation in terrorism, as

limited information is available disaggregating group membership in these clandestine organisations.

In one exception, Botha (2014) presents analysis of interviews conducted with 95 individuals in Kenya associated with the militant Islamist group, Al-Shabaab (including recruits, and fighters returned from neighbouring Somalia), and 46 relatives of individuals associated with the group. According to respondents, 57 per cent joined Al-Shabaab before they turned 25, and a further 21 per cent, before they were 30, making the group (whose name translates literally as 'The Youth') predominantly youth-focused. The author found very little evidence of financial and economic incentives motivating participation among the respondents: the majority of respondents referred to religion as their primary motivation for joining; only 6 per cent combined religion with economic reasons; and just 4 per cent referred to economic reasons primarily. As such, only one in ten respondents in total referred to economic motivations in any way. Botha (2014: 207) concludes:

This places a question mark on the ideological commitment of these individuals. In other words, if these individuals had access to other employment opportunities they would not have joined these organizations. At the same time, it also places a question mark to the success of strategies — based on a small percentage of respondents who raised employment — that by offering only employment opportunities, individuals will not join these groups.

Another study suggested that the effect of unemployment among the youth population varies by gender, with young male unemployment being a stronger predictor of violence than young female unemployment rates (Caruso and Gavrilova 2012), but the strength of evidence and emergence of a consensus around this issue remains weak.

Ultimately, the evidence suggests that economic incentives play a role in participation in *certain forms* of violence. The most substantial area of disagreement in the literature is not whether this is the case, but precisely *how much* of a role these play, at which level, and in what kinds of violence. The strength of this relationship, the conditions in which it is relevant, and the degree to which it influences participation alone, or in conjunction with other factors, remains unclear.

Box 4.1 Economic incentives, unemployment and youth participation in violence

- ✓ Some evidence to suggest unemployment and economic incentives motivate participation in crime, but little evidence of a relationship between violent crime. Both violence participation and employment are mutually compatible for at least some forms of violence.
- ✓ Mixed evidence on the relationship between economic incentives, unemployment and youth participation in higher-intensity violence: evidence of both a positive and a negative relationship. The effect may be contextually specific.
- ✗ Limited robust evidence that economic incentives alone, or predominantly, influence participation in terrorism.
- ✗ Limited data on youth economic incentives and unemployment specifically, highlighting a significant gap in existing research.

4.2 Grievances and marginalisation

While economic theories suggest that youth participation in violence can be reduced to the material incentives related to un/under-employment, a broader framing suggests that while

economic hardship and, more generally, un/under-employment play a role, this is primarily through the creation of grievances and the perception of marginalisation which fuels violence. In this framing, un/under-employment may be sources of alienation and frustration, rather than simply financial hardship.

In contrast to the economic literature, which operationalises violence participation as an income-generating activity alone, ethnographic accounts often emphasise the way in which un/under-employment reflect systematic discrimination through labour markets, the education system, and financial institutions, which produce grievance and resentment. This broader view reflects the way in which disenfranchisement and discrimination has political, as well as economic, dimensions (Miguel 2007). Underlying this, is the contention that labour is not simply a commodity like any other, but rather because it is a human, social phenomenon, it is a social institution, which incorporates social norms and (of particular relevance to this study), ideas of status and fairness (Solow 1990).

The primary challenge to robustly assessing this relationship is the difficulty in measuring non-material explanations, incentives and motives (Blattman and Ralston 2015: 30). Azeng and Yogo (2015) use fixed-effects regression and instrumental variables in a study of 24 developing countries from 1980–2010, and find that youth unemployment is significantly, but weakly, associated with an increase in the risk of political instability. In this context, however, instability is operationalised as a composite measure of executive changes (which may not necessarily involve violence) and military instability (including armed conflict and civilian deaths from conflict), and does not directly gauge youth participation. They find stronger evidence for a relationship between youth unemployment and anti-government demonstrations, consistent with scholarship that emphasises the importance of disaggregating between discrete *forms* of violence, but note that these are unlikely to result in national-level unrest. The authors argue that the relationship is a result of socioeconomic inequalities and high rates of corruption, associated with large-scale youth unemployment. In the qualitative literature, a number of studies have sought to understand experiences and motivations for participating in violence more directly. Mercy Corps (2015) draws on interview and survey evidence to argue that there is,

no relationship between joblessness and a young person's willingness to engage in, or support, political violence... For many youth, narratives of grievance are animated by the shortcomings of the state itself, which is weak, venal or violent. Or all three. Young people take up the gun not because they are poor, but because they are angry.
(Mercy Corps 2015: 2)

The study draws on data from Afghanistan, Colombia and Somalia, and argues that while unemployment can be symptomatic of wider sources of frustration and marginalisation for young people, 'employment status alone does not appear to determine whether a young person is likely to join an insurgency' (Mercy Corps 2015: 17). The research analyses surveys of graduates of vocational training who had successfully found jobs, but whose responses showed that employment had no measurable effect on levels of support for armed insurgents.

These findings highlight the degree to which work represents other perceived injustices and concerns in society. For example, Walton (2010: 1) argues:

While many early recruits to rebel groups such as the RUF in Sierra Leone or the JVP in Sri Lanka were unemployed, for example, the motivating factor behind violence was not unemployment *per se*, but rather grievance at an unjust and corrupt patrimonial system that increasingly shut out young people.

Other studies have also explicitly linked the question of grievances to work and employment opportunities, by arguing that the lack of employment produces not only economic incentives for young people to participate in violence, but also a sense of anger and,

a clear sense that they were being excluded from the labor market and from the power, opportunities and resources that the older generation – and particularly a few members of the older generation – has.

(Barker and Ricardo 2005: 34)

In this framework, employment status and opportunities provide not only one of a composite set of issues over which grievances arise, but more specifically, that they diverge from economic theories in that employment creates a specific sense of frustration and marginalisation that is not simply financially motivated. The authors quoted respondents who had been involved in violence, stating:

Since 1981, I have been involved in every riot there has been. If the violence came, I would be involved. I had no work. I had nothing to do. Why should I not get involved? Three months ago, I became employed as a civil servant. Now that I am getting my daily bread, why should I get involved? Lots of men do not have this [stable work].

and

Some of our leaders used this violence to achieve their aims [...] To make their candidates stronger [...] They know we don't have jobs (and that we'll get involved in this violence).

(Barker and Ricardo 2005: 33)

In an attempt to address the literature that speaks to distinct *types* of violence, Humphreys and Weinstein (2008) explore the determinants of participation (of predominantly young people) in *both* insurgency and counterinsurgency forces in the same Sierra Leonean context, through micro-level survey data with over 1,000 respondents. The authors find some evidence for competing theories (including economic incentives and grievance-based arguments), although looting and predatory activities appeared to play a lesser role among rank-and-file soldiers, as opposed to leadership. The results indicate that the interaction between these factors remains under-theorised and imprecisely explained in existing literature. Importantly, however, the authors find that typical 'grievance' proxies are significant and positively associated with participation in both state and non-state forces, suggesting that these correspond to a higher likelihood of violence participation generally, rather than non-state (or insurgency) violence specifically. Hoffman's (2011: 37) study of combatants in the same conflict comes to a similar conclusion, summarising an interaction in which a pro-government fighter identified strongly with the complaints and grievances of Sierra Leonean youth outlined by RUF literature.

With regards to the high-profile question of participation in terrorist organisations, and particularly, the phenomenon of the 'foreign fighter', very little evidence has robustly demonstrated the role that work might play in producing grievances, that in turn account for the choice to participate in violence. In many ways, this phenomenon – requiring, as it does, significant investment and resources of time and travel on the part of the individual – holds constant some of the factors that complicate studies of participation in violence in active (and geographically proximate) conflict zones, as it would appear to entail a more active choice and greater agency in relation to participation.

In a recent contribution to this literature, Verwimp (2015) has concluded that there is a significant and positive correlation between the gap in employment between EU/non-EU nationals and the number of recorded foreign fighters in Syria per million inhabitants of

several EU countries. The results hold with an alternative specification of the model, which explicitly considers the gap in employment between 25–34-year-old non-migrants and second-generation migrants of the same age group. In other words, the less likely these groups are to be employed, the higher likelihood that a country will see a larger number of foreign fighters in Syria. The author further controls for school and student socioeconomic status, as well as level of education of migrants on entry, and finds that these factors can only partially account for the poor performance of migrants in some of the highest ‘foreign fighter’-contributing EU countries. In other words, structural conditions within the school system itself may account for poor performance, and interact with unemployment. Although the findings are preliminary, they may be cautiously interpreted to lend support to a grievance-based explanation of the marginalising effect of unemployment, and constitutive educational constraints, on the choice to engage in violence overseas.

Together, these results suggest that jobs, at least through the economic incentives they create alone, may be insufficient to deter participation in violence. For at least some forms of violence, other factors, including injustices and wider patterns of marginalisation, of which work status may be one, may need to be addressed.

Box 4.2 Grievances, marginalisation, unemployment and youth participation in violence

- ✓ Considerable consensus around the fact that unemployment, or work status more generally, may play a role in the generation of wider grievances, rooted in social, economic and political marginalisation, which may in turn shape the decision to participate in violence.
- ✓ Some evidence to suggest that employment alone does not effectively reduce support for violence, if perceptions of inequality or injustice persist.
- ✗ Given the broad definition of such grievances, however, specifying the degree to which work status features in the decision to engage in violence, is difficult, as it often forms one of a suite of factors that individuals self-report; and/or feature in econometric models.

4.3 Social norms and expectations

An alternative pathway through which youth employment status or experiences may shape decisions to participate in violence is through the social norms and expectations that are embedded in work. Because youth status more broadly defined corresponds to a period of transition between childhood and adulthood, these expectations, and the construction of identities in line or in conflict with social norms, may be particularly acutely felt by young people. Although young women are also active agents in violence, armed conflict and the activities that sustain it (see Stewart 2010; Dietrich and Quain 2014), the vast majority of the literature concerning social norms and expectations is focused on the construction of militarised or hegemonic masculinities, and the ways in which these promote or produce violence.

In the simplest formulation, un/under-employment may be linked to strain and stress, particularly around pressure to deliver on social norms and expectations, and therefore is more likely to induce violence (Aaltonen *et al.* 2013: 570). In this line of argument, unemployment may conflict with expected social roles for young men, such as serving as a ‘breadwinner’ in a household. This theory has been particularly prominent in explanations of intimate partner and gender-based violence. Ethnographic studies suggest that widespread unemployment can lead ‘to a growing number of young men basing their authority *vis-à-vis* women on bodily powers [...] rather than on economic powers and social status’ (Groes-Green 2009: 286). For example, jobs crises have been linked to higher instances of intimate partner violence in several countries, with increases in reports of domestic violence linked to

jobs losses and financial concerns (Ortiz 2012: 22), but the data available do not provide evidence on the role of young people specifically.

Violence participation may also be shaped by experiences of work, or contacts formed through it, more broadly defined. Although not explicitly concerned with the role of work as a feature of conflict, Parkinson's (2013) study of mobilisation and violent participation in Palestinian organisations in Lebanon in the 1980s contends that mobilisation into violence by various pathways was shaped by systematic overlaps between militant hierarchical structures and everyday social networks, suggesting the importance of social connections in conflict mobilisation. Viterna (2006) suggests similar networks and situation contexts shaped the pathways by which Salvadoran women became involved in guerrilla forces there. Extrapolating from social networks generally defined, to those which may emerge and be shaped through work, these studies may be read to suggest that professional and labour networks could play an important, if understudied, role in violence participation.

Conversely, participation in violence may offer what participants *cannot* find through employment – either because it is not available, or because the nature of work available precludes it – including, income, but also a source of respect and status, access to social ties and belonging. As Cramer (2010: 6) notes,

if there is a social significance to labour market participation beyond the straightforwardly pecuniary this involves norms of fairness, ideas of status, and the value derived from belonging to group and forging social ties through a variety of interactions. Participation in groups using violence – gangs, militia, insurgent groups, formal security forces – will most likely also be partly or chiefly 'about' these same values, sources of identity, and opportunities for social ties.

In this vein, Hoffman (2011: 38) references the accounts of young combatants in the Sierra Leonean civil war, noting the extent to which 'youth experienced themselves not as partisans but as young men sharing in the *jouissance* of combat and camaraderie', quoting one former commander who described 'the jungle life' as 'like fulfilling a desire. A commitment, you understand. It's like taking up a challenge or meeting a challenge'.

Unemployment and social norms may also feed into violence in contexts of more widespread conflict. A study of violent cattle raiding in South Sudan found that unemployment and restricted economic opportunities, coupled with increasing bride prices, and institutionalised social pressure to participate in violent raids and successfully secure cattle as a rite of passage for young men, all fed into the perpetuation of this violent cycle. The study contends that, 'In the context of large-scale unemployment and few educational opportunities, it is not easy for men to achieve a sense of identity and to live up to social expectations of them as men' (Saferworld 2014: 7). In the same country context, youth participation in more organised violence, such as the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), or other ethno-communally mobilised militias, has also been conceptualised as among 'symbols of power that bring a sense of identity, masculinity, worth, and place' (Patinkin 2014).

Similar factors have been identified in the case of Kosovo. There, high unemployment, among a range of other conditions, were seen to 'make it more difficult for men to define themselves through the role of the breadwinner'. These in turn fed into 'a narrative of threatened masculinity [...] reinforced by a more general narrative of gender crisis, [that] offered militarism as a way of winning back both individual and national dignity' (Bracewell 2000: 577, 567). Equally, in DRC, scholars have linked child and youth participation in violence to a socially constructed 'ethics of security', through which 'the phenomenon of child soldiering has been made possible by a moral code which stresses obedience to a higher cause' (Hoffmann 2010: 341). In the latter context, however, it would be important to

differentiate between children and youth, in order to better specify how and when agency and choice may shape participation.

In all of these cases, non-material benefits of participation or group membership may compensate for the risks and uncertainty associated with involvement in violence, and certainly complicate the picture of violence as an ‘occupational choice’ motivated by material incentives alone (Blattman and Ralston 2015: 23). In such cases, the role of work may be twofold: first, that it provides a means of accessing these non-material benefits and fulfilling particular norms and expectations; and second, that in the absence of it, violence provides an alternative pathway to securing these. From a policy and preventive perspective, therefore, employment can most effectively support reductions in violence if it provides other pathways to esteem. This therefore suggests that both the context in which such an intervention takes place, and the nature of that employment, would be central to effectiveness. Unfortunately, very little comparative research has been conducted to trace these differential effects. At the same time, it is important to recall that in most cases, participation in violence remains the domain of a minority of young men, in spite of the fact that social constructions of gender, and experiences of un/under-employment, may be widespread (Saferworld 2014: 10). More research could usefully highlight where, why and among whom militarised masculinities gain traction, and are effectively leveraged to mobilise or motivate violence, and when they are not.

Box 4.3 Social norms and expectations, unemployment and youth participation in violence

- ✓ Work status has been linked to non-material factors, including anxiety, frustration, and pressure over meeting and performing social norms and expectations, particularly for young men.
- ✓ ‘Militarised masculinities’ can be directly or indirectly shaped by un/under-employment in different ways, including through the effects of loss of income, and the impact of reduced social status, both of which may be mitigated by participation in violent groups.
- ✗ Although young women may also participate in violence in different forms, very little research has explored the construction of gender, social norms and expectations in relation to this, and less still on the role work may play in the decision to participate. The vast majority of literature is devoted to understanding constructions of male identities in this respect.
- ✗ It remains unclear what effect different *types* of work might have on violence, mediated through social norms, although there is a strong theoretical reason to assume this should be significant. There is also insufficient evidence to identify why widely socially constructed concepts of masculinity serve to motivate and mobilise violence among some young men, and not others, even in conditions of widespread unemployment.

5 Gaps and opportunities for future research

The preceding evidence review explores three major theories and mechanisms by which work may play a role in young people’s decision to participate in violence. It also suggests several gaps in existing research, and opportunities for future research.

The first and most pressing gap concerns the availability of data, and the design of rigorous, systematic and robust research to meaningfully explore this relationship. There is a pressing need for robust research that, for example, pairs and effectively compares groups of un/under-employed young people, disaggregated by various factors (including patterns of

social difference, but also by forms of violence, and degrees of participation), in violence and conflict, in addition to young people who do not participate. Currently, much existing research selects on the dependent variable through research on participants in violence alone, or on 'high-risk' populations who are seen as 'vulnerable' to violence or radicalisation (Izzi 2013). Alternatively, research a parallel body of research typically extrapolates from general conditions – such as the level of youth unemployment in an economy – to say little about individual motivations. Randomised control trials provide one opportunity to explore this more robustly, but so too would the phased roll-out of programmes, or natural experiments involving differentiated work or employment prospects, or differentiated violence dynamics, across territory or time. More precise research methods are particularly important because of the fallacy of linking wider conditions to individual action in cases where violence is, typically, a minority activity.

A second gap in the research concerns the disaggregation of 'youth' as a presumed homogenous category of people, and of experience. To date, insufficient attention has been paid to the diversity of 'youth' as a category in this research, and the field has often failed to ask: how does work shape participation in violence among and across different categories of youth (age, gender, urban/rural, and other signifiers of social difference)? This is particularly crucial if we follow the proposition that the role and value of work, and the nature and contours of youth, are socially constructed. In that case, we should expect this relationship to vary within and across individuals and groups of young people. However, little evidence has been presented on this variation so far.

A third opportunity for future research concerns the disaggregation of violence itself, in a bid to better understand the varied relationships between work and violence, and types of violence with each other. For example, how does low-intensity violence escalate to high-intensity, and vice versa; how do young individuals radicalise *in* and out of violent groups; and what, if any, role does work play in these dynamics? Critically, situating this relationship within a wider appreciation of the political conditions, motivations and incentives for participation in violence – including self-defence, self-preservation, protection, and violence at different temporal and geographic points in a conflict – would contribute to advancing this literature, and better integrating recent progress in conflict and violence research.

Finally, too little is known about the nature and types of work, and how these relate to violence, including whether they facilitate, motivate, or preclude it. Evidence suggests that legal work and participation in violence are not mutually exclusive in all contexts, and so we require a better understanding of how work can co-exist with violence, and even produce it. This might include attention to the nature of work, and the ways in which particular types of work may produce different economic, or social incentives, or fail to meet particular social expectations on the part of an individual. Research in this area might also turn to more practical, or logistical, considerations around how certain forms of work (for example, highly seasonal work, or work in urban or rural locations) can co-exist in young people's lives with participation in different forms of violence. Similarly, if violence is caused by multiple factors, one of which may be work, then what kind of conditions would need to shift alongside employment provision/job creation, to be most effective, and what opportunities does this present for interventions and policy? Evidence suggests that, particularly in low-income countries, households diversify their income streams across multiple forms of economic activity: in that case, how do variations in the nature of this portfolio (including its reliability, variability and composition) affect the likelihood of participating in violence, or supplementing some activity with violence?

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