

CAN ECONOMIC INTERVENTIONS REDUCE VIOLENCE?

Impacts of Vocational Training and Cash Transfers on Youth Support for Political Violence in Afghanistan

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Policy Brief

Overview

Reducing violence and the growth of violent movements remain central challenges for the international community. For the last two decades, billions of dollars have been invested in economic development programs in conflict and post-conflict states, with an often-implicit goal of reducing young peoples' engagement in violence by providing youth with jobs or other economic opportunities. In places like Afghanistan, donors and development practitioners invest heavily in youth interventions focused on creating employment as a primary means for mitigating youth participation in armed opposition groups (AOGs).

However, the evidence remains mixed—at best—as to whether these interventions are effective in reducing violence, even when they are effective in terms of their primary aim of improving economic outcomes. Few rigorous impact evaluations have been done to explicitly assess the impact of economic improvements on levels of political violence. This makes it difficult to reach definitive conclusions about whether economic development programs are achieving their oft-assumed aim of having a positive impact on peace and stability.

To help address this evidence gap, over the course of the last year, Mercy Corps undertook a randomized controlled trial with 1,590 participants in our economic development programming in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan. We tested the impact of particular economic interventions—specifically, youth employability programming and cash transfers—on youth attitudes toward and willingness to support political violence.

Our findings are both important and heartening: when vocational training programs were paired with the provision of cash, young Afghans' willingness to support and participate in political violence reduced significantly – by 17 percent compared to control groups. This study provides strong evidence to support the argument that development interventions can indeed shift young people's attitudes toward violent groups and address the underlying causes of these attitudes.



Context

INVEST in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan

INVEST is a youth vocational training program that trains young men and women—including local residents, returnees, and IDPs—in a range of vocational skills in and around Kandahar City and the three neighboring districts of Dand, Daman, and Arghandab. The program’s primary goals are to help vulnerable youth develop skills that are responsive to local labor market needs and to support them with economic opportunities through three- and six-month technical training courses.

It is important to note that the INVEST program’s original goal was not to reduce violence; rather, it was designed as a youth skills training and employment program. However, given Mercy Corps’ interest in understanding how economic interventions may contribute to broader stability goals, the program provided a unique opportunity to determine whether improved economic conditions could decrease individuals’ support for political violence. Thus, for the purpose of this study, an additional component — Unconditional Cash Transfers (UCT) —was provided to a random sub-sample of participants. The cash transfers were not a part of the INVEST program Theory of Change and were delivered independently as part of the research.

Research Design

For the purpose of this study, our research question was: does improving young people’s economic conditions reduce their willingness to support political violence and armed opposition groups?

We examined three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Technical, vocational education and training (TVET) and/or unconditional cash transfers (UCTs) will reduce youth propensity for violence and support for AOGs, through improvements in economic outcomes.

Hypothesis 2: TVET and/or UCTs will reduce youth propensity for violence and support for AOGs, through improved psychosocial well-being.

Hypothesis 3: TVET and/or UCTs will reduce youth propensity for violence and support for AOGs, through improved perceptions of government functioning and responsiveness.

Policy Relevance

Donors and policymakers struggle to identify effective ways to support stability in fragile contexts. The *States of Fragility 2016* report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) underscores that violence is a central characteristic of fragile states, and if violence is not addressed, these states will be unable to reach their development goals. According to the World Bank, violence and violent conflict, rather than natural disasters, are now the leading causes of displacement worldwide, driving 80 percent of humanitarian needs. The Bank also notes that the same conflicts have accounted for the majority of forcibly displaced persons every year since 1991. Finding effective ways to reduce and prevent violence has never been as central to the development sector as it is today.

Key Findings

Vocational training by itself did not reduce levels of youth support for political violence, despite having demonstrably improved economic outcomes even six to nine months post intervention.

Participating in a Technical, vocational education and training (TVET) course improved several key indicators of economic activity, including the number of days youth worked and the amount of money they earned. In an environment like Kandahar, achieving these economic outcomes is important and positive in their own right – a testament to the program design and execution of our team and partners. However, our findings showed that participation in the vocational training program *alone* had no impact on any of violence-related outcomes, neither in the short term nor six to nine months post-intervention. The fact that there was no impact on political violence outcomes at six to nine months post intervention indicates that even when one's economic outcomes improve, there is no guarantee of an effect on reducing support or participation in violence. These findings make a strong case against the often-presumed link between vocational training—with its resulting improvements to economic conditions—and political violence.

Cash transfers alone reduced youth's willingness to support violent groups in the short term, but these positive effects quickly dissipated.

Providing youth with one-time cash transfers equivalent to \$75 led them to be significantly less likely to support political violence in the immediate aftermath of the cash transfer. However, six to nine months later, the effect reversed, with youth who only received cash transfers registering slightly higher support for armed groups. These findings were hard to explain. We think that because recipients spent their \$75 on basic needs, the cash transfer may have affected perceived opportunity costs in the short term, such that having cash in the short term possibly reduced the lure of financial support from armed groups. The disappointment six to nine months later of not being able to sustain economic independence, then, may have led to increased levels of support for armed opposition groups.

The combination of vocational training and cash transfers significantly reduced young peoples' willingness to engage in armed opposition group actions six to nine months post intervention.

The combination of cash transfers and TVET led to the largest reduction—17 percent—in willingness to support violent groups six to nine months after the end of the interventions. In examining the reasons why the combination of cash transfers and TVET reduces support for AOG actions, we find that youth's perceptions of government responsiveness improved in the short term in a combined TVET and cash transfer scenario. While the reduction in support for political violence does not materialize until six to nine months later, taken as a whole, these findings indicate that the combination of cash and vocational training may help dampen support for political violence over the long term by signaling government's ability or willingness to address people's needs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

These findings affirm that development interventions can have a positive impact in shifting young people's attitudes related to violence and violent groups – a long contested debate. Overall, the research suggests that multifaceted development approaches that concurrently address economic challenges and governance-related grievances appear to be more effective in reducing the risk of political violence among youth than stand-alone interventions. The additional recommendations emerge from our research:

Pair short-term and long-term interventions to reduce violence. Providing young people with more discretionary money, in this case through cash transfers, may have given them a short-term financial boost that helped them realize the potential of the longer-term TVET intervention and thus reduced their support for political violence. In addition, the cash transfers, when combined with the provision of TVET, improved recipients' perceptions of the government, which they saw as being more responsive to their needs. Notably, it was when TVET participants gave credit to the government for the cash transfers they received that we saw a reduced willingness to support AOG actions.

Invest in multidimensional interventions to address multifaceted motivations for violence. Individuals support violent movements for multiple reasons – ideological, political, self-interested, and/or altruistic, such as the desire to protect one's community or identity group. Often, these motivations interact with one another and with people's identities to determine this support. Interventions that focus on only one potential motivation for participating in violence are much less likely to be successful. Interventions to address violence need to respond to multiple motivations, notably, in this case, those related to governance grievances and the underlying causes of economic circumstances.

Make intentional use of cash based on awareness of the benefits and risks. Our research showed that cash transfers—even in small amounts—can yield short-term benefits that can diminish young people's willingness to support violent groups. Initial evidence indicates that this may be because the cash enabled youth to meet immediate financial needs, thereby reducing the ability of AOGs to economically coerce youth to participate in or support violence. However, our finding on the uptick in cash recipients' supportive attitudes toward political violence six to nine months after the transfer serves as an important reminder that donors and governments should not only focus on short-term solutions but also consider the longer-term ramifications. While further exploration of the impacts of different forms of cash transfers on violence is needed, policy and program decision makers should be aware of the potential for negative effects over the longer term when using small one-time cash transfers by themselves to further violence-reduction goals.

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