

INEE Round Table “The Role of Education and Youth in Preventing Urban Violence and Countering Violent Extremism”

~ Case Studies from Research and Practice ~

Summary

	Organisation	Mercy Corps
	Location	Portland, OR (USA)
	Title	Pivoting CVE Programming in the Face of Political Transitions in Yemen
	Key Themes	CVE, Non-Formal Education, Safe Spaces
<p>Overview:</p> <p>In October 2010, Mercy Corps launched the Engaging Youth for a Stable Yemen (EYSY) program in Aden and Lahj. In March 2011, the Arab Spring led to protests across Yemen, leading to the fall of the long-serving Yemeni president, Ali Abdullah Saleh. Months of protests as well as the transition in power exacerbated the power vacuum and left much of Yemen seemingly ungovernable—the type of environment in which violent extremist groups take hold. As a result of these changes in the environment we:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Found a way to partner with mosques and work with moderate religious leaders • Opened safe spaces for youth to congregate and reduce social isolation • Used non-formal education opportunities to teach youth about civic engagement and conflict management • Had youth identify positive role models • Expanded geographic area <p>These changes in programming helped curb the disenfranchisement that pushes youth into violent extremist groups, which is evident by lower presence levels of VE groups present during the current crisis in Yemen and reports that the South has never been more cohesive. As donors and INGOs return to Yemen, building this social cohesion through educational opportunities so VE groups have less room to maneuver is a critical lesson to take forward.</p>		

Description of Context: (problematize, include figures/data where possible)

When Mercy Corps entered Yemen in October 2010, the situation was as follows: Yemen suffers from a combination of conflict, lack of development, poor governance and rapid population growth, which reinforce each other and contribute to the risk of state failure. Since 2004, the Al-Huthi rebellion in the North has killed thousands and displaced an

estimated 250,000 Yemenis.¹ Al Qaeda, which has increased in profile since the thwarted bombing of a US-bound airplane, manipulates existing tensions between citizens and the government in underserved areas where the rule of law is weak. Inter-tribal and tribe-government conflict, while often localized and related to resources such as land and water, is exacerbated by a breakdown in tribal conflict management traditions, blood revenge, and the proliferation of small arms. Finally, the increased violence in the South is related to perceived discrimination regarding the delivery of basic services and pilfering of oil profits. These grievances are compounded by the historical socialism in the South, where people are accustomed to relying on the government for the provision of services. Government response to popular protests with lethal force, repression of human rights and limiting the freedom of the press has further radicalized the population. This conflict, which is escalating daily, is a substantial destabilizing force and requires concerted efforts on the part of the Yemen government and donors to address these grievances effectively.

Pressures on the government to improve the economy and provide basic services will only grow with 75% of the population under the age of 25 and 25% between 15 and 25. Young people have fewer economic opportunities compared to previous generations who were able to migrate to Saudi Arabia or other countries for work. In the South, a young woman complained that before unification, “there had been jobs when we graduated, even after secondary school. But now, even with a Masters degree, we do not find jobs.”² Without jobs or a way to provide for their families, young people are increasingly at risk of radicalization. A recent study on youth and security in the South found higher rates of radicalism in poorer areas.³ Young people also feel excluded from their communities; they are not included on local councils and in the South, youth are becoming increasingly frustrated by local authorities who abuse human rights. Violent groups and religious extremists exploit young people’s isolation by targeting them with radical messages through charismatic leaders and media. Women are not immune to these dynamics. Elder women, supported by extremist imams, go door-to-door to “educate” severely isolated young wives about Islam with the hope that they will encourage their husbands to join forces.⁴

Yemen joined the Arab Spring as protests started in Yemen in late January 2011. The protests were largely peaceful, and remarkably even when youth protestors were shot upon, they didn’t shoot back. This is even more remarkable given Yemen has one of the highest rates of small arms per person in the world. After an attack on the palace, President Saleh fled to Saudi Arabia and Vice President Hadi became acting president in May 2011. Finally, in November, Saleh agreed to the transferring of power and Hadi was elected as President in February 2012.

While Hadi is from Aden, where the separatist movement was strongest, the changes in government and unclear processes moving forward created a power vacuum that VE groups tend to exploit. Our baseline study, conducted in July 2012, found that 56% youth surveyed had no trust in the government— some of the lowest levels of trust youth have in the government that Mercy Corps has seen anywhere. Additionally 76% of youth had been

¹ UNHCR estimate February 2010. In February 2010, Al-Huthis and the government signed a new ceasefire agreement, but various experts do not believe it will hold.

² Youth Focus Group participant in Lahj, Mercy Corps Yemen Assessment (2010)

³ Lower House of Parliament Study on Youth and Security in South Yemen (2009)

⁴ Interview with Saswan Alrefai, YLDF.

avoiding areas due to security, and close to 50% of males reported handling justice issues themselves. Also raising concerns, we found that 61% of youth in Aden and 25% in Lahj would seek friends for advice. The high percentage of youth in Lahj not seeking out friends raised our concern that youth there were isolated and could easily be recruited by VE groups.

Explanation of the Intervention: *(rationale, conceptual basis, process)*

As a result of these factors, Mercy Corps designed the Engaging Youth in a Stable Yemen program, funded by USAID. The program's goal, was to help young people form positive social connections and overcome generational and community divisions through a combination of conflict management, consensus building and leadership training; community-government-youth dialogues; community service projects; and internships and apprenticeships with positive role models who could counteract extremist messaging.

a) Methodology and Approach

Mosques: While the design always intended to engage religious leaders, the importance of that in the midst of these political transitions became even more important, especially as we were entering new communities.

Youth Centers: As the baseline study showed, social isolation was a challenge, especially in the more rural areas like Lahj. This was true also in Abyan. With VE groups preying on those who feel socially isolated, we established 5 youth centers and strengthened three others in the targeted governorates. These safe spaces helped youth to build connections among each other through social activities reducing youth susceptibility to manipulation by political elite and violent groups. The youth centers are working to empower youth and prepare them for participation in political, social and economic spheres in this transition period by building their capacity, enhancing networking and serving as hubs for information sharing and learning.

Non-formal Education: The Youth Centers provided a safe space for both young men and women to receive numerous non-formal education opportunities. We realized that it was unclear for youth where to go for training and the security environment made them wary of engaging in certain activities. For example, young women Lahj were able to attend courses on Family Violence, Women Psychology and Abuse by Husband, and Women Rights Workshop. Additionally, the Centers made it easier for young people to know what courses were available to them and various local NGOs would provide non-formal education services at the centers. In addition to civic engagement and conflict management trainings, youth could sign up for a range of courses including computer courses, remedial reading and writing, English, and transitional justice. Social activities (ie. movies, sports—playing and spectating, cultural events) would draw in youth who typically would not attend civic and conflict management trainings. However, as they developed friendships through the center, they were more likely to engage in these other courses.

Internships and Apprenticeships: The internships were designed to address pull factors—building relationships with positive role models. Initially it was assumed Mercy Corps would find internships and apprenticeships for youth. However, as this was about building relationships with people youth themselves would connect to, we had the

participants identify the internships they were interested in, and then these were vetted by Mercy Corps.

b) Implementation Process

The EYSY program supported relationship-building through a number of different activities: life skills, consensus building, and leadership training; community-government-youth dialogues and community service projects. Among other accomplishments, EYSY and local partners facilitated dialogue sessions between local authorities and youth, supported the implementation of community service projects, and provided life skills training to young men and women.

Instability, insecurity and limited access to the field heavily impacted implementation of the EYSY program since the escalation in hostilities in 2014 in all three target governorates. EYSY tried to overcome the challenges by re-locating some of its activities or by suspending them temporarily, but regrettably by early 2015 many planned activities had to be cancelled.

Results & Findings: *(outcomes, direct/indirect results, intended vs unintended, challenges)*

Since October 2010 EYSY has directly reached 3,024 young men and women in Aden, Lahj, Abyan, and Taiz Governorates.

- Dozens of dialogues between local authorities and youth
- More than 345 internships for youth in the private and public sector,
- 32 grants to business groups run by youth
- Supported the implementation of over 50 youth-led community service projects
- 1,500 young men and women received life skills training
- 5 youth centers established and 3 existing centers strengthened to provide a politically neutral and safe space for youth

The challenge has been with staff turnover being able to measure beyond outputs and conduct as robust of an endline as we did for the baseline. However, remarkably with this latest round of violence, there has been a strong sense of social cohesion in Aden and the neighboring governorates where people want to protect their community non-violently from outsiders—whether Houthis, Saudis, or other outside groups. The hope is to leverage this opportunity to build a more peaceful Yemen. The reports in Taiz, however, are more troubling as political divisions are becoming more pronounced and the city could further fragment after the violence ends. Programming will need to pivot once again once access returns.

Conclusions: *(suitability of the approach, adaptability to other contexts, lessons learned, outcomes, direct/indirect results, intended vs unintended)*

In contexts experiencing political power vacuums, and the presence of armed groups, including VE groups, building social cohesion through educational opportunities so armed/VE groups have less room to maneuver is a critical lesson to take forward. Even when formal schools were closed for safety reasons, community centers remained open and youth regularly attended

program activities. Without a counterfactual (i.e. control group) we cannot attribute the program activities at these centers to preventing youth participating in violence or VE groups, however, positive social engagement among youth participants was observed and documented throughout the program.

Future programs functioning with adolescents and youth should consider Non-Formal Education programming run from community centers as a supplement – in the case where adolescents and youth are unlikely to return to school or schools are closed – or a complement where schools are still in session and additional social capital building and tutoring for educational attainment would be beneficial.

Links: (*documents, references, websites etc.*)

NA

Key questions and considerations for further engagement: (points for further discussion among members in the Roundtable discussions)

- i. As we aim to understand how educational programming prevents or supports youth participation in violence, how might we evaluate the respective roles played by human capital (educational attainment) vs social capital (peer, mentor support/cohesion) in preventing VE and/or urban/gang violence?
- ii. Knowing that fragility caused by conflict is often fluid and emergent, due to changing conflict dynamics, how can our educational programming best incorporate promising practice in the area of adaptive management to ensure our programs adjust to the changing context around it?
- iii. What parallels or lessons learned can be shared between the approach applied by this PVE program in Yemen and gang/urban violence programs elsewhere?
- iv. What is the role of education to support the post-conflict reconciliation process? What past examples can we learn from and what current/future reconciliation efforts should we focus on?