

Skills development, job creation, and migration intentions in Afghanistan and Somalia: **Assessing the counterintuitive evidence**

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Policies and programmes funded by international donors in Somalia and Afghanistan work under the assumption that more economic development in poor countries will lead to more jobs, fewer migrants, *and* less violence. Evidence from qualitative and quantitative databases in both countries suggests that job-training and skills development schemes fail to deliver on these premises. What can policy-makers and practitioners learn from such counterintuitive findings?

One of today's key and unquestioned hypotheses in development aid programming is that promoting economic development and – specifically employment programmes – is instrumental in deterring youth of the Global South from migrating to OECD countries. In Europe, *'the long Summer of Migration'* (Kasperek and Speer, 2015) paved the way for the Valletta Summit on migration in November 2015. There, European and African Heads of State and Government established an unprecedented €3,3 billion Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF Africa) to *'address the 'root causes' of instability, irregular migration, and displaced persons, and contribute to better migration management in Africa.'*¹ Translated into operational practice, the European response to the recent influx of asylum-seekers is to dedicate massive resources to creating jobs and livelihoods opportunities, to skills development and vocational training, to micro- and small entrepreneurship – especially for young people and women in countries of origin – with the hope that such initiatives will impact their aspirations, migration intentions, and final decision.

This policy brief tests these hypotheses on both *instability* and *irregular migration* from a 'country of origin' perspective. Afghanistan is emblematic of decades-long migration and international investments in curbing migration trends through youth employment interventions. In this context, it has been common sense to every stakeholder that addressing the root causes of migration or support for violent extremism requires large-scale education, vocational training, and employment programmes. The Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, announced in 2015 the launch of 'Jobs for Peace', a jobs programme designed to stem the exodus of young Afghans to Europe. In turn, the European Union (EU) announced in 2016, through its Joint Way Forward agreement with the Government of Afghanistan, its focus on a *'program combating*

*irregular migration by improving employment*² through skills development, labour market stimulation and job creation. Will such investments lead to the expected counter-migration or counter-violent extremism outcomes?

This policy paper intends to test such a common sense hypothesis of 'root causes' and 'solutions' by exploring the actual impact of youth employment and skills development initiatives in Afghanistan and Somalia. The analysis uses 12,200 quantitative interviews with youth from six data sets collected by Samuel Hall³ and Mercy Corps to evaluate the impact of past programming on the tendency of youth to (re)migrate. Additional focus group discussions were conducted in Somalia, Afghanistan, Greece, and Italy, to complement and nuance the quantitative findings. This impact analysis allows for an understanding of the ways in which existing programmes have impacted youth's circumstances, bringing more clarity to the gaps and achievements of past programming. Overall, the purpose of this analysis is to enable policy makers and practitioners to develop more effective programmes to support potential youth migrants.

This policy note starts by presenting a number of problematic yet "common sense" assumptions on which most policies and programmes are based. It then presents counterfactual findings from the impact

¹ 2015 Valletta Summit on Migration 11-12 November 2015.

² 2016 Joint Way Forward on migration issues, EU.

³ The secondary analysis was based on existing databases on Afghan and Somali youth ranging from 2014 to 2017: 1) Mercy Corps Somali Youth Leaders Initiative survey results (2016 – Somaliland, 803 interviews); 2) Mercy Corps Somali Youth Leaders Initiative survey results (2017 – South Central Somalia and Puntland, 1221 interviews); 3) Mercy Corps INVEST (2015-2017 – Kandahar survey, 6367 interviews); 4) Samuel Hall Youth-Employment-Migration Nexus (2015 – Somaliland Puntland, 784 interviews); 5) Samuel Hall Urban Displaced Youth in Kabul (2014-2017 – Kabul, 2021 interviews); and 6) Samuel Hall Livelihood Programmes for Displaced People in Urban Afghanistan (2014 – Afghanistan, 1028 interviews).

evaluations of the six datasets to propose an alternative approach to international cooperation on migration in countries of origin.⁴

Assessing common sense hypotheses

Common sense 1 = job programming creates jobs...

As noted in a 2018 World Bank report, *'the Afghan population is expected to grow dramatically in the next decades, doubling its size from 28.4 million in 2010 to 56.5 million in 2050. (...) It is projected that of the 400,000 annual labour market entrants, only 200,000 will be able to find jobs in Afghanistan. This leaves the remaining 200,000 with two options: find jobs outside of Afghanistan or become self-employed.'* (Holzmann, 2018) Common sense would argue that massive job creation efforts, such as large scale employment policies and skills development programmes, are likely to reap the dividends of the youth bulge while deterring unsuccessful new entrants to the job market from fleeing to other countries.

The academic literature, however, invites scepticism about the actual capacity of youth employment initiatives to achieve this dual objective.⁵ McKenzie (2017) reviews existing research on poor-country governments' active labour market policies and programming, and his conclusions are unequivocal. On the labour supply side, the most promising interventions appear to be ones that help workers access different labour markets, overcoming sectoral and, especially, spatial mismatches, hence encouraging mobility. On the demand side, the most successful alternative policies and programs help firms overcome regulatory obstacles (innovation, doing business, hiring). By contrast, the least successful interventions have focused on job-training, skills development, and large-scale employment schemes.

⁴ Several caveats should be noted. Most importantly, the studies were not randomised controlled trials (RCT) and thus the findings were of a correlative rather than a causative nature. Finally, this research merely addresses migration intentions – namely, the likelihood or planned odds of migration in the near future. The decision to migrate is influenced by both aspiration and ability (Carling, 2002) to migrate and actual desire to migrate, but this quantitative analysis is not designed to distinguish between them. Instead, the researchers intentionally excluded indicators which were determined to be exclusively means based, as opposed to rooting households out of a desire to stay put.

⁵ Programme outcomes can also be further undermined by socio-cultural norms: the 2014 end-line evaluation by Samuel Hall of the World Bank-funded Adolescent Girls Initiative in Afghanistan – Female Youth Employment Initiative (FYEI) – shows that out of the 1151 FYEI graduates, only 7% had a paid job at the time of the survey, which roughly equates to the percentage before the programme started.

Common sense 2 = job creation reduces migration outflows...

Secondly, common sense assumes a logical pathway between job creation and socio-economic (re)integration. In Somalia, the EU-funded RE-INTEG programme launched in 2017 aims to enhance Somalia's responsiveness to the management and reintegration of mixed migration flows, through the creation of *'realistic livelihoods opportunities (...) to anchor populations within Somalia.'*

Again, the literature comes to a paradoxical conclusion, as stressed by Clemens and Postel (2017) in their review of the academic literature on the impact of targeted development policies and programmes on emigration: in low-income countries, development – translated into better incomes, health, and education – *'facilitates investment in emigration much more than it deters investment in emigration.'* More specifically, Berthélemy et al. (2009)'s cross-country assessment of the global average impact of assistance on actual emigration finds that aid and development substantially contributes to raising net emigration from the average poor country to high-income OECD countries: when aid rises by 10% of GDP, the average emigrant stock as a share of population increases by 1.5 percentage points.

Common sense 3 = job creation deters youth from violence...

In a 2011 USAID policy document setting the agency's mandate on development response to violent extremism, it is stated that the agency's *'experience with integrated youth programming offers examples of crosscutting approaches that include vocational and technical training, life skills, employment search support, and positive, peer-group, civic engagement.'* (USAID, 2011). Over the past two decades, USAID has managed several programmes that specifically aim to foster stability in fragile and conflict-affected areas. While the focus is slightly different and more targeted to specific extremist subgroups, stakeholders in both Somalia and Afghanistan generally agree that Counter Violence Extremism (CVE) programming *'recycles and window-dresses stabilisation initiatives, uses the same funds, with a slightly different jargon.'*⁶

⁶ Key Informant Interview with donor, Somalia Country Office.

It is thus essential to learn from existing assessments of stabilisation initiatives by assessing their impact and actual capacity to support counterinsurgency, counter-violence, and economic development programming. In a comprehensive assessment of stabilisation programmes in Afghanistan, USIP (2017) draws a grim picture of the situation by stressing that *'any impact (whether positive or negative) was short term and transitory at best. This appears to be true of both civilian-led and military-led programs. It also applies to the stabilization efforts of other foreign donors, such as Norway, Germany, and the United Kingdom.'* (Kapstein, 2017). In a similar fashion, the academic literature to date contests the idea that development assistance can be an important deterrent to violence and conflict. After a review of 19 studies involving a causal identification between aid-funded interventions and violence, Zürcher (2017) concludes that *'aid in conflict zones is more likely to exacerbate violence than to dampen violence. A violence-dampening effect of aid appears to be conditional on a relatively secure environment for aid projects to be implemented.'*⁷

Findings from Afghanistan and Somalia – a critical impact assessment of the nexus between youth programming and aspirations

The quantitative analyses of the *Mercy Corps* and *Samuel Hall* datasets seek to understand if – and if so, in what ways – interventions have had an influence on youths' (1) intention to migrate and (2) support for political violence.⁸

Finding 1 = there is, at best, no correlation between programme attendance and intention to migrate

Of all the programs reviewed, only the SYLI⁹ intervention in Puntland and South-Central Somalia appeared to have a correlation between intention to migrate and programme attendance. In this case, it was actually a strong *positive* correlation between the intention to migrate and programme attendance, meaning that youth who attended school were more likely to intend to migrate.

⁷ This is true of all six types of aid-funded interventions he investigates—including conditional cash transfers, humanitarian assistance, and employment promotion.

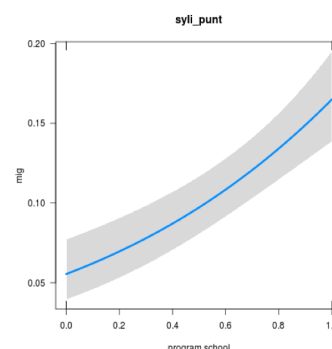
⁸ Most of the studies did not involve a true randomized controlled trial, and when they did, the sampling weights were not easily reproducible. Thus, it is not possible to directly estimate the impact of programming on specific outcome (intention to migrate, support to violence). However, regressions allow for the computation of incidental correlations, which may suggest a mechanism of causation.

⁹ The Somali Youth Leaders Initiative is a 5-year US-funded programme implemented by Mercy Corps that aims to increase education, economic and civic participation opportunities for Somali youth to reduce instability in target areas.

This does not necessarily indicate that the youth did not benefit from the programme, but merely that it had a mixed impact on their intention to migrate. No other study had a statistically significant correlation between programme engagement and intention to migrate, suggesting that the logical consequence between education or employment programmes and migration intentions does not carry the burden of evidence.

Examining the studies in turn, the *Urban displaced youth* (UDY) study by Samuel Hall – exclusively conducted in Kabul with 2,021 15-to-24-year-old respondents – demonstrated that employment status was tied to increased intentions to migrate. This indicates that the actual positive benefits to the youth of socio-economic development interventions may not be the ones that practitioners and policy makers hope for.

Figure 1: Correlation between intention to migrate and programme attendance (SYLI, 2017)



From a different perspective, the *Livelihood Programmes for Displaced People in Urban Afghanistan* study, conducted in five urban centres, only addressed support received after displacement¹⁰ and showed a correlation between what were termed comfort assets and an increased intention to migrate: *'We were forced to move from Ghazni to the capital and lost almost everything (...) at that time, we did not have the resources to choose, but now that we have more money and knowledge, I hope I can send my two sons to a place where they can be safe and get a decent life. It cannot be in a camp and not in this country anymore.'*¹¹

Overall, although programming was found to have limited favourable correlation (and thus likely limited impact) on migration intentions, it is of some interest to examine the impact that they did have. The INVEST study involved beneficiaries of two specific programmes: technical and vocational education and training (TVET), and unconditional cash transfers (UCT). The statistical analysis found a correlation between TVET programming and a higher likelihood of

¹⁰ The question used to determine programme engagement was 'Since you settled in this area, have you received any help or assistance?' It thus does not address programming or support before displacement.

¹¹ Focus group participant, W., Male, 52, Kabul.

employment, suggesting that the goal of the TVET programme had been achieved to an extent. Of note is that three factors – negative safety experiences, negative outlook and employment – were all correlated with an increased intention to migrate as well, though programme engagement itself was not correlated with migration intentions. If the impact of the INVEST programme on stabilising people and anchoring them in their area of origin is inconclusive, there are key areas of need still highlighted, given the indication of poor psychosocial status and experiences of insecurity amongst respondents – continuing to highlight the need for protection and psychosocial support.

The SYLI Puntland and South Central study included beneficiaries of two programmes: school attendance and leadership training. The SYLI Puntland programme (the school portion only) did show a positive correlation on the employment security factor, incorporating both employment and outlook for the future, which itself was positively correlated with an intention to migrate. There was also a positive correlation between the school programme and the factors related to access to education/employment (quite obvious, given that these respondents were accessing school and the comparison group was not) and community inclusion. Overall in this programme, it appears engagement in school has had the positive benefits of improved employment opportunities, optimism, and a sense of community inclusion – the latter two addressing key areas related to psychosocial status.

In summary, while programmes have likely had a limited impact on deterring migration intentions, there are additional positive factors and areas for continued support. The focus on impacting migration intentions may be misguided, but there remain many ways to increase youth's well-being at home.

Finding 2 = there is no evidence of a clear correlation between programme attendance and support for and use of political violence

The second outcome of the quantitative analyses of the *Mercy Corps* and *Samuel Hall* datasets is about the possible impact of youth programming on individual support for political violence. This second set of issues was only addressed in the two SYLI studies in Somalia and the INVEST study in Afghanistan. The statistical results are equivocal:

- **Exposure to violence:** there is a negative correlation between both school and leadership engagement and the factors related to experiences of sexual violence and violence in the SYLI Somaliland study, suggesting youth attending the programme had experienced less violence than kids not enrolled in the programme.
- **Support for violence:** In SYLI Somaliland, the theoretical support for violence had a significant negative correlation with school attendance, whereas in SYLI Puntland and South Central this correlation was positive – suggesting

that in this study, school attendance is associated with greater support for political violence.¹² In the INVEST endline study, support for political violence had a mild, marginal positive correlation with both TVET graduation and UCT reception.¹³

- **Use of violence:** The actual use of violence, however, was negatively correlated with school attendance in both locations. This result was somewhat mitigated by participation in leadership training, suggesting perhaps that those participating might have a higher tendency to resort to violence, or at least to admit having done so as use of violence may predate engagement in the programme. In terms of violence used, there was no notable correlation in the INVEST study.

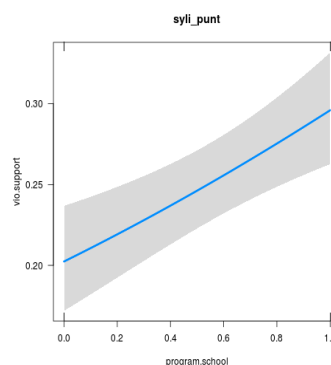


Figure 2: Correlation between support for violence and programme attendance (SYLI-Puntland and South-Central, 2017)

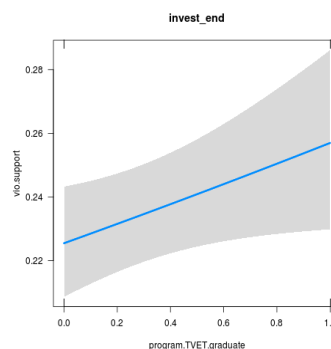


Figure 3: Correlation between support for violence and programme attendance (INVEST - TVET, 2017)

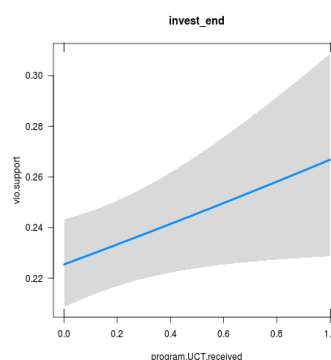


Figure 4: Correlation between support for violence and assistance (INVEST - UCT, 2017)

¹² Well beyond the 99% confidence interval.

¹³ A detailed analysis can be found at Kurtz, J., Tesfaye, B., & Wolfe, R.J. (2018). Can economic interventions reduce violence? Impacts of vocational training and cash transfers on youth support for political violence in Afghanistan. Washington, DC: Mercy Corps.

These findings suggest that interventions targeting youth – either through TVET, cash transfer, or leadership programmes – have no impact, or a limited impact, on youth support for (or use of) political violence.

Questioning the assumptions

This policy paper calls for a redefinition of the conceptual paradigm that not only guides governmental policies and strategies but also prevails in the programmes of most of their implementing agencies.

Complexity vs. linearity

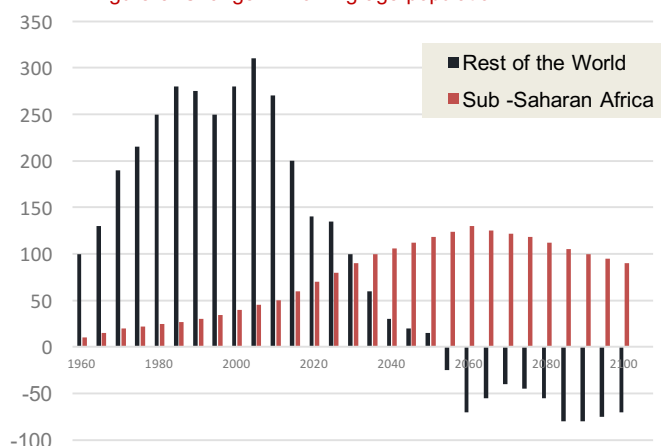
USAID-funded stabilisation and counter-violent extremism programming as well as the ongoing EUTF-led initiatives operate at an unprecedented scale,¹⁴ which comes with an increased responsibility. The three common sense hypotheses assessed in this paper fail to explain the *why* and the *what* of migration dynamics or support for violence, as they lock themselves in linear explanatory models – rational choices, ‘root causes’ or push/pull factors – that do not explain much and are even misleading when used as a strategic and programmatic cornerstone. To get the measure of such historical responsibility, stakeholders (international donors, local governments, aid agencies) should not shy away from complexity by: 1) promoting longer-term frameworks (especially on issues like migration or CVE); 2) localising responses and ensuring greater involvement of local actors; and 3) systematising real-time learning and ongoing adaptation.

Pragmatism vs. deterrence

As highlighted by Clemens and Postel (2017), at a time when demographic dynamics point to a net increase of 800 million workers in sub-Saharan Africa by 2050, and given the aging population structure of most OECD countries, it may be time to better include sub-Saharan Africa’s labour force into global supply chains and shift *‘from an exclusive focus on deterring migration and toward shaping migration for mutual benefit.’* Again, this approach should not be unilateral; for instance, the migration of young and educated workers (brain drain) has a high social and economic cost in sub-Saharan Africa. In this regard, more complex skills development and employment schemes should be co-developed between origin and destination countries, with the support of aid agencies like Mercy Corps, to promote *‘safe, lawful, and mutually beneficial channels for lower- and higher-skill labour mobility.’* (Clemens, 2015)

¹⁴ Castillejo, C. (2016)

Figure 5: Change in working age population



(Sources: United Nations, World Population Prospects, 2012; and IMF staff calculations)

Integrating vs. anchoring

While the six surveyed programmes have likely had a limited impact on migration intentions or support for violence, there are suggestions of additional positive factors as well as highlighted areas for continued assistance. In today’s context, this underlines the idea that the focus on impacting migration intentions or support for violence may be misguided. These dimensions appear challenging to substantially influence, *but* this analysis also suggests that they can contribute, in many ways, to increasing youth’s integration and wellbeing – from a social, economic or psychosocial standpoint. (Samuel Hall / IOM, 2017) *Integrating*, however, should not be mistaken for *anchoring* or *detering*. As evidenced in a series of fifty group discussions with Somali and Afghan youth in their home countries, as well as Iran, Greece, and Italy, to complement the quantitative analyses conducted for this paper, many participants complained about a *lack of options*:

‘You ask me when and why I decided to leave but in fact I did not have any choice. I did not decide and no one else did it for me. I just had to leave Puntland because there was no other option there.’ (I., Male, 24, Garowe)

‘I have a job in Kandahar with a local NGO but my family knows that the only way for me to thrive is outside my country. There is no real discussion. We are only concerned about the opportunity and timing.’ (B., Male, 23, Kandahar)

‘Choice? What choice? You don’t get to choose anything when you embark on a trip like this one. And it was the same thing in Somalia, no choice, no options.’ (M., Female, 21, Hargeisa)

Behind these individual accounts, the lack of sense of *agency* was central to many youths interviewed *before*, *during* or *after* their journey. Thus, while emphasis has been put on how policies, strategies, and programmes

should address the root *causes* of migration or support for violent extremism, the quantitative and qualitative findings of this study show that many youths feel bored, powerless, and passively trapped into a life they have to endure.

To integrate these youths into tomorrow's ecosystems – political, economic, social, and cultural ones – the question should not be '*How should policy makers and practitioners influence migration choices or deter youth from supporting violent extremism?*' but rather '*How can policy makers and practitioners optimise people's (and youth in particular) agency?*' In line with the capability approach, developed by Sen (1984) and expanded on by Nussbaum (2011), this alternative paradigm posits that '*the crucial good societies should be promoting for their people is a set of opportunities or substantial freedoms, which people then may or may not exercise in action,*'¹⁵ as opposed to other accounts of wellbeing focusing on short-term material gains, such as an income or jobs.

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¹⁵ Nussbaum, M. (2011). *Creating Capabilities*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.