



# Youth Employment in Fragile States

**Young people are potentially a tremendous force for change in conflict-affected countries for both good and bad. Directing the energy of youth towards reconstruction is a challenge and requires rapid interventions in the areas of education, family life and health, economic empowerment and civic participation.**

**October 2008**

Young people constitute an important share of the population in developing countries, yet governments and aid agencies have generally been slow to fashion responses to their specific needs. This appears to be rapidly changing. Particularly in fragile states, youth is increasingly being singled out as a target group deserving specific attention in terms of intervention programmes. The rationale for these interventions is linked to preventing violence and reinforcing developments to increase stability. The underlying assumption is that

young people may be either a threat to or a key force for peace and stability. Agencies such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the World Bank, the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), among others, have recently released publications about youth, in particular youth in conflict situations.

Departing from the conviction that young people are central actors for tackling the challenges faced by fragile states, this brief summarizes current debates on

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

**Integrated approaches:** Youth programmes should take the form of integrated approaches to improving *social integration* (basic and vocational education; family life and health), *economic production* (income-generating activities, skills development and microenterprise development) and *political participation* (civic engagement, community service).

**Direct targeting:** Direct targeting of young people through quotas or affirmative action programmes as part of national public works schemes and other job-creation initiatives ensures that they are actually the beneficiaries. Experience shows that it is not enough to include “youth” as a cross-cutting issue in policies and interventions.

**Urban focus:** Urban areas host large youth populations and require specific attention through particular urban programmes, such as being hired in infrastructure development projects. In conflict countries, urban areas may grow dramatically due to an influx of rural dwellers seeking refuge.

**Economic production:** Attention must be directed to establishing and promoting economic production, which is the key to employment generation. One focus area is to promote *links* between rural and urban economic sectors. In the aftermath of conflict, rural areas often suffer from low agricultural productivity and unsettled property rights, which are potentially destabilizing for peace.



issues of relevance to interventions targeting youth in war-to-peace transitions. Particular attention is paid to the young peoples' own experiences and perceptions regarding employment opportunities.

## FRAGILE STATES, CONFLICT AND YOUTH

Although the concept of "fragile states" is not limited to countries affected by conflict, such countries form a significant sub-set of fragile states and thus warrant particular attention, hence the focus of this brief. The OECD's Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States reflect a growing consensus that *strong economic performance* and *employment generation* can reduce poverty and strengthen citizens' confidence, trust and involvement with state institutions. In respect of such involvement, young people stand out as a particular target group.

In this brief, youth is defined as individuals aged between 15 and 24, following the UN General Assembly's definition. However, exact meanings vary across space and time and can, for example, be different for men and women. In general terms, "youth" refers to the transitional years between childhood and adulthood,

which is usually marked by certain rites of passage or other defining events, such as gaining employment and/or establishing a family.

Conflict and instability alter, disrupt or delay social processes such as young people's transition into adulthood-status. Hence, in conflict countries the "youth" segment of the population is heterogeneous in terms of life situation, responsibilities and needs. For example, the oldest among this group, who have grown up in the context of conflict and have few productive skills adequate in a post-conflict labour market, are often responsible for supporting ageing parents or raising their own children. The younger segments might not have such responsibilities, and hence are prone to prioritize education over work and income-generation. Given this diversity among young people, it becomes difficult to design a policy that specifically targets the needs of *all* of them.

## DESIGNING POLICIES AND INTERVENTIONS

Integrated approaches that take into consideration the diversity among youth groups and address several concerns simultaneously (for instance, education, vocational training, and health concerns) seem most



*Young carpenter, Liberia*

appropriate. Young people have a myriad of issues confronting them, and a single stringed intervention cannot meet them all. To draw up precise youth-appropriate policies and programmes, governments and international agencies need background information, which is not readily available, particularly in fragile states. However, the lessons that have been learned highlight certain dilemmas and elements as crucial for designing future policies and interventions.

It is important to address the dilemmas of *inclusion* and *participation* in fragile states where a range of social, political and economic relations may lead to the partial or total exclusion or marginalization of young people. The cases of Liberia and Sierra Leone show that vulnerability and exclusion are more decisive causes of conflict than the mere unavailability of gainful employment. Increasingly donors are highlighting youth inclusion as a key variable in programme design, implementation and evaluation, but it is often not enough to include “youth” as a cross-cutting issue. Experience shows that broad interventions run the risk of reaching upper-class youth more often than the marginalized, as well as young men more than young women. One way forward is to map the characteristics and challenges that particular youth groups face in fragile states. Based on the results, youth groups should ideally be active participants in the design of affirmative action programmes as part of national public-works schemes and other job-creation initiatives.

The *spatial setting* is another key element. Distinct challenges are involved in dealing with urban and periurban young people as opposed to those scattered in rural settings. Moreover, episodes of civil unrest dramatically change the character and desires of the younger population. Young people from rural areas who have been forced to migrate to urban areas by instability and conflict or the collapse of rural economies are often reluctant to return to rural areas in peacetime due to the limited employment opportunities. Still the general assumption in post-conflict interventions seems to be that most youth groups, including ex-combatants, will eventually return to rural areas once investment and reconstruction efforts stimulate economic development. However, international experience suggests that few young people return to live in rural communities after living in urban environments.

A reluctance to return may stem from other aspects as well. War experiences may have changed young people’s visions and aspirations, making them unable or unwilling to reintegrate into the patterns of rural life. Young ex-combatants may fear retaliation upon returning to their communities of origin. Rural households may encourage young people to remain in urban areas because they can contribute to the village’s or household’s networks of financial and social support.

### **BOX I. WHAT PREVENTS YOUNG PEOPLE FROM ENTERING THE LABOUR MARKET?**

#### **At the personal/social level:**

- low education
- illiteracy
- physical and psychological scars from war experiences and violence
- teenage pregnancy
- social norms that exclude women from engaging in productive employment

#### **At the institutional level:**

- scarcity of educational and vocational training institutions, especially in rural areas
- the high costs of enrolling in secondary education
- available skills training fails to target young people
- skills training confined to a limited number of trades
- the skills provided do not match market demands

#### **At the national level:**

- national policies fail to target and benefit young people directly through e.g. quota systems
- young people are mainly represented and treated as security concerns
- limited participation of young people in decision-making and policy formulation
- limited employment opportunities

In sum, policies and interventions must *not* assume that young people from rural areas who end up in urban areas due to conflict and economic vulnerability return – at least not without specific incentives. In acknowledging this, a revision of the basic assumptions behind current economic efforts of reconstruction, including the increased focus on youth and agriculture, is of paramount importance. Likewise, an urban focus highlighting the role of urban centres as gateways to economic development must be considered. However, the focus need not be either/or, but can encompass both by addressing the economic development potential in *linking* rural and urban economic sectors. Interventions simultaneously boosting agricultural productivity and small-scale industrial manufacturing can generate employment opportunities that are attractive for both rural and urban youth.



## BOX 2. IDEAL MAIN FEATURES OF YOUTH EMPLOYMENT TRAINING PROGRAMMES

- The ideal employment training programme for young people is driven by *labour market demands* and opportunities; it is set up with *flexible timing* regarding both delivery and participants' entry into and exit from programmes.
- The programme is oriented towards *concrete job opportunities*, teaches *multiple skills* and provides *practical work experience* acquired through on-the-job training or apprenticeship.
- It takes as its starting point *participants' competences* and the recognition of *prior learning*; and it supports the employment training with *life-skills training* taught by *positive role models*.

## OBSTACLES FOR THE YOUNG TO ENTER THE LABOUR MARKET

Fragile states often count on large youth populations, whose capacity to play a constructive role in the social, economic and political development of their

countries is restricted. In such environments, young people typically share one or more of the following characteristics: illiteracy and/or low education, knowledge and skills levels; poverty, unemployment and dependence on external sources for livelihoods; and the physical and psychological scars of war, trauma and gender-based violence, which can lead to alienation from society. Hence, young people face many barriers and obstacles to engaging in productive employment and establishing sustainable livelihoods (see Box 1). Somehow, the goal of keeping the needs of youth visible in fragile states can be compared to the struggle to increase the focus on the needs of women that began in the 1970s.

In spite of the many obstacles, most young people demonstrate remarkable ingenuity and creativity in their everyday survival; many already work in informal economies or as small-time entrepreneurs. Efficient employment training programmes for young people should therefore treat them as competent agents and recognize their previous work experiences and competences (see Box 2).

Finally, examples abound of young people in fragile states productively engaged in contributing to the future of their societies. Let us take note of their commitment and learn from them.

*Jairo Munive,*  
research unit on Migration  
[www.diis.dk/jmr](http://www.diis.dk/jmr) - [jmr@diis.dk](mailto:jmr@diis.dk)

## FURTHER READING:

Freedman David (2005) *Youth Employment Promotion: A Review of ILO Work and the Lessons Learned*. Youth Employment Network, (YEN) Papers; No 1, Geneva.

UNDP (2006) *Youth and Violent Conflict: Society and Development in Crisis?* Compiled by Michi, E., Izzi, V., Lendon, A., Ngjela, E., Sampson, P. and Lowicki-Zucca, J, Bureau for Crisis Prevention. New York.

World Bank (2006) *World Development Report 2007: Development and the Next Generation*, Washington, DC.

**More on fragile situations: [www.diis.dk/fragile](http://www.diis.dk/fragile)**

## DANISH INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Strandgade 56, DK-1401 Copenhagen, Denmark

Ph. +45 32 69 87 87 · Fax +45 32 69 87 00 · e-mail: [diis@diis.dk](mailto:diis@diis.dk) · [www.diis.dk](http://www.diis.dk)