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Just keeping them busy? Youth employment projects as a peacebuilding tool

The promotion of youth employment is a popular peacebuilding measure in post-conflict settings. Giving jobs to young people is widely seen as an essential way to harness their energy towards constructive and peaceful purposes and discourage their recruitment for violence. Unlike traditional youth employment projects, these interventions set themselves a twofold objective: creating jobs and promoting peace in post-conflict societies. However, little is known about their impact on either of these fronts, and there is anecdotal evidence that youth employment projects in post-conflict settings have often fallen short of the expectations of donors, governments and beneficiaries alike. This article argues that the practice of using youth employment projects for peacebuilding is rooted in untested, problematic and possibly flawed assumptions, and this fundamentally affects the chance of success for such interventions.

Keywords: youth, employment, conflict, peacebuilding, violence, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau

In recent years, the international peacebuilding agenda has shown growing interest in youth, alternatively referred to as a ‘force for peace’ or a ‘threat to peace’. Of particular concern for policymakers is the issue of youth unemployment: if young people are idle and lack life prospects – so the mainstream argument goes – they will be significantly more vulnerable and thus likely to become involved in violence of various forms. Consequently, giving jobs to young people is widely regarded as a priority in post-conflict countries, as ‘a bridge between security, peace building and development’ (UN, 2007, 51). The World Bank recommends that ‘[e]mployment and the creation of jobs for young people should […] form a key component of any peace building processes’ (World Bank, 2009, 3).

Attention at the policy level has been accompanied by an increase in resource for youth employment projects: a cursory glance at the funding portfolio of the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund (UNPBF) shows an emphasis on providing young people with jobs and livelihood opportunities, as a way to harness their energy towards peace and discourage their recruitment for violence. These interventions differ from ‘traditional’ youth employment projects, in that they set themselves a twofold objective: (1) giving jobs to young people; and (2) promoting peace in post-conflict societies. However, little is known about their impact on either of these fronts. Rigorous evaluations are worryingly scarce, and those that exist tend to focus on immediate outcomes (e.g. the number of jobs created by the project), without considering such factors as the sustainability of these jobs, the overall impact on the labour market and the relation with social cohesion.

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Several studies have noted common problems with youth employment projects, including the lack of a long-term vision, disconnect from macro-level policies, unpredictable funding and poor coordination. It is often remarked that interventions are driven more by donors’ preferences than by a thorough understanding of the local economy and labour market, and tend to privilege the low-hanging fruit of increasing young people’s employability over the much more challenging task of stimulating job demand (Beasley, 2006; Darkwah, 2013; Hajdu et al., 2013; UN et al., 2009).

This article takes a step back by focusing on the theory of change underpinning youth employment projects; namely, the idea that creating more jobs for young people will naturally strengthen social cohesion and decrease the risk of violence. I argue that formulating this linkage as a straightforward equation leaves fundamental questions unanswered (What kind of jobs? Jobs for whom?) and overlooks the possibility of a trade-off between the two objectives of job creation and peacebuilding. Examples are drawn from three post-conflict countries in West Africa – Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea-Bissau.

**Youth unemployment: a global phenomenon that defies quantification**

We are continuously reminded, by media and international agencies alike, that youth unemployment is on the rise worldwide. Since its outset in 2007, the global financial crisis has imposed a particularly dire burden on young people trying to enter the labour market. While all age groups were impacted by the crisis, youth unemployment increased at a faster pace compared to overall unemployment (Verick, 2009). In 2009, of the world’s estimated 211 million unemployed people, nearly 40 per cent were between the ages of 15 and 24 (ILO, 2011, 1). This grim picture appears even more discouraging if one considers that a large number of young people are engaged in poor quality jobs, with low salaries and no benefits or guarantees (ILO, 2011, 1).

Data should be read with caution: unemployment is an ambiguous notion, which is notoriously difficult to measure, track over time and compare across space. The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines the unemployed as individuals who meet three conditions: they are (i) without work; (ii) currently available for work; and (iii) actively seeking work. There is, however, considerable room for discretion when interpreting these criteria. The condition of being ‘actively seeking work’ is perhaps the most controversial, as in many developing countries there is no functioning system to record job hunters. This criterion also excludes people who would, in principle, wish to work, but are too discouraged about their prospects to do anything about it, and are therefore caught in a no man’s land of the labour market: they are not working, but they are not unemployed, either (Leonhardt, 2008; O’Higgins, 1997).

Thus, statistics that only count those that are ‘actively looking for work’ can be deeply
misleading, at times leading to the apparent paradox of a falling employment rate, together with a falling unemployment rate. Furthermore, in countries where governments do not provide unemployment or welfare benefits, people cannot afford to be completely inactive; rather, they are engaged in a variety of smaller activities in a daily effort to get by, often with very modest incomes. Standard household surveys fail to capture this dimension, as they typically ask respondents to quote their ‘main activity’, rather than the panoply of activities that they resort to in order to survive (Weeks, 2010). As a consequence, considerable measurement issues can arise when comparing unemployment rates among countries or even within the same country over time.

The notion of ‘youth’ is equally problematic. Most cross-country comparisons use the official, but not binding, definition of youth given by the UN General Assembly, i.e. the population falling in the age cohort between 15 and 24. However, definitions adopted by national governments vary widely. One noteworthy development in Africa over the last few years has been the definition of youth in very expansive terms, with the upper ceiling pushed well into the mid-thirties. The African Youth Charter, adopted in 2006, defines youth as individuals aged 15–35 – a definition reaffirmed by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in its 2008 Youth Policy, as well as by many African governments. For example, the Sierra Leone National Youth Policy, adopted in 2003, uses the 15–35 definition. The same age bracket is used in Ghana, Guinea and Liberia, among others, while in Mali, the upper limit is even higher (40). Thus, in most of Africa, youth is officially defined as covering a period of two decades or more (Ismail et al., 2009).

Youth unemployment can be measured in different ways, including: (1) as a percentage of the youth population; (2) as a percentage of the youth labour force; (3) in relation to total unemployment; or (4) in relation to the adult unemployment rate. The combined readings of these indicators tell us the extent to which unemployment is specific to youth, as opposed to being a broader problem in society. Policy responses should vary accordingly: if the problem is specific to youth, appropriate interventions may aim at easing the transition of young people into the job market, through, for example, apprenticeship schemes or subsidies to companies that hire young people. If, on the contrary, unemployment affects the population in general, policy responses need to have broader scope. The challenges in defining both ‘youth’ and ‘unemployment’ make ‘youth unemployment’ a disturbingly slippery notion: recognising the vagueness of the concept should be (but, most often, is not) the starting point for any discussion on this topic.
Do youth employment projects reduce unemployment?

By and large, youth employment projects implemented by donors in post-conflict countries are modelled after Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs) in Western Europe and the United States (USA). ALMPs can be defined as public transfers that are linked to some forms of activity (usually subsidised work experience or training), with the aim of helping young job-seekers obtain gainful employment. These programmes rest on the assumption that, for one reason or another, the labour market is not working optimally and/or certain labour market outcomes are socially unacceptable (Casey, 2004). In terms of their actual contents, youth-oriented ALMPs can be schematically categorised as follows:

- ALMPs that focus on the supply side, trying to increase the employability of young people. These are based on the assumption that job-seekers are ill-equipped to find a job, because their skills do not correspond to labour market requirements. Interventions include, for example, remedial education, vocational training, internships and apprenticeships.

- ALMPs that focus on the demand side, actually creating jobs that would not exist otherwise. Private sector programmes consist of measures aimed at putting in place incentives that alter employers’ and/or workers’ behaviour regarding private sector employment – for example, wage subsidies, waivers to social security contributions or tax breaks, in order to encourage firms to hire young people (Kluve, 2010). Direct job creation in the public sector aims at redressing seasonal, cyclical and structural joblessness by offering a minimum-pay job: in essence, the state acts as an employer of last resort. These programmes are generally instituted in times of economic slowdown; the best-known and largest (in terms of scale) example remains the New Deal, following the 1929 Great Depression in the USA (targeted to the unemployed in general and not specifically to youth).

- ALMPs that focus on matching the demand and supply sides of the labour market. The assumption is that young job-seekers are prevented from accessing existing jobs, because of barriers like lack of information or low ‘presentability’. Job-search assistance comprises many different types of services: training for job-search techniques, mentoring on CV preparation and interview skills, counselling on career choices, and dissemination of information about existing vacancies.

- ALPMs that focus on providing young people with skills and opportunities for entrepreneurship and self-employment. These programmes typically employ a combination of training in business methods, facilitated access to credit or grants and/or access to work space (O’Higgins, 1997).

Even in countries with a considerable track record in job creation for youth, little is known about what works and why. The question of how much reliance govern-
ments should put on ALMPs thus remains highly controversial. Proponents argue that ALMPs are the most direct instruments for dealing with youth unemployment, whereas opponents counter that such programmes are largely a waste of public funds and that any observed benefits for participants come at the expense of other workers. The empirical literature is vast and often provides contradictory conclusions, depending on country, time period and the specific characteristics of the programme(s) under consideration (see, for example, Antonopoulos and Kim, 2011; Betcherman and Godfrey, 2007; Betcherman et al., 2004; Card et al., 2009; Dar and Tzannatos, 1999; Fretwell et al., 1999; Kluve, 2010; Martin and Grubb, 2001). Evaluations of ALMPs are rather scarce, and they are mostly limited to assessing the impact of specific interventions on their intended beneficiaries, rather than the general impact on the labour market (Martin and Grubb, 2001). Many evaluations do not compare the target group with an untreated control group and do not follow the target group through for an extended period of time. Very few look at the net employment benefit, thereby taking into account the possibility of (positive or negative) interactions between programme participants and the rest of the population. Therefore, evaluations mostly ignore the possibility of deadweight loss effect (where programme outcomes are no different from what would have happened in the absence of the programme); substitution effect (where workers hired in a subsidised job are simply substituting for unsubsidised workers, who would otherwise have been hired); or displacement effect (where a firm with subsidised workers increases output, but displaces/reduces output among firms who do not have subsidised workers) (Betcherman et al., 2004).

Despite the dearth of evaluations, one finding that emerges rather consistently from the experience of ALMPs in Europe and the USA is that interventions have suffered from overemphasis on the supply side – i.e. increasing the skills of prospective workers. Training-heavy programmes have been found to have low impact, seldom passing an economic cost-benefit test and sometimes being harmful (Betcherman and Godfrey, 2007; Blattman et al., 2011; Card et al., 2009). Indeed, unless demand for skilled workers increases in parallel, vocational education and training serve ‘only as waiting rooms, not as launching pads’ (Hamilton, 1994, 248). Interventions aimed at increasing young people’s job qualifications and thus making them more presentable on the job market may simply reorder the queue of job applicants: beneficiaries of such interventions may move ahead, but the total number of jobless people remains the same (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005).

It is even more problematic to establish to what extent lessons learned (if any) can be transferred from OECD countries to African countries. For one thing, the latter have a younger demographic, which, combined with the above-discussed expansive definition of youth, means that a very large section of the population falls into the ‘youth’ category, creating a significant overlap between youth unemployment and unemployment tout court. Furthermore, the labour market in African countries
is characterised by a high degree of informality: most of the labour force is self-employed, employed in informal sectors or working in subsistence agriculture (World Bank, 2009). Consequently, data on youth unemployment are extremely unreliable, making it very difficult to assess the overall impact of interventions on the labour market (Cramer, 2010, 13).

Job creation in post-conflict economies

Not surprisingly, post-conflict countries present a number of additional challenges for youth employment policies and programmes. In these contexts, basic infrastructures are generally in disarray, raising transaction costs and limiting access to markets. The purchasing power of local populations is very limited (Beasley, 2006; ILO, 2009), while war economies and criminal networks continue to thrive (Birkerhoff, 2005; Wennmann, 2005). Governance institutions suffer from low legitimacy, are often plagued by corruption and fall short of their obligation to provide security and basic public services. Human capital is particularly weak, as many young people have missed out on education due to the conflict, and many qualified workers have been killed or have left the country; besides, decimated post-war economies are ill-equipped to absorb new workers, however skilled or unskilled they may be (Maclay and Ozerdem, 2010, 349). In short, limited economic opportunities for young people are linked more to the overall challenges of a post-conflict economy than to the specificity of their age (Peters et al., 2010, 75; UN et al., 2010, 4–5).

Recognising the shortage of paid employment opportunities in post-conflict settings, donors have given particular emphasis to supporting self-entrepreneurship, through activities such as training, mentoring for the elaboration of business plans, micro-credit and the provision of starter kits. For example, the Youth Enterprise Development Programme, funded by the UNPBF in Sierra Leone and starting in 2007, aimed at assisting young people (a target group of 15,000) to set up their own enterprises for self-employment and provided support to business development services, microfinance, training and skills development. Similarly (but on a much smaller scale), the Youth Professional Training and Employment project, financed by the UNPBF in Guinea-Bissau, provided young people with training and mentoring on self-entrepreneurship, by helping them to translate their ideas into business plans and enabling them to access credit, in order to jump-start their businesses. An evaluation of the Guinea-Bissau project notes that: ‘the potential employment areas identified were not the result of a true employment market survey of current and future skills required’ (Larrabure and Vaz, 2011, 18). A similar conclusion was reached by a joint evaluation of youth employment initiatives in Sierra Leone (UN et al., 2010).

To date, the evidence that donor-funded youth employment programmes can
Youth employment projects as a peacebuilding tool

Actually reduce unemployment (their first purpose) is flimsy at best. Much more systematic and rigorous research is needed in terms of how participation in these projects affect beneficiaries’ life prospects after donor funding is gone, compared to those who have not participated, and how this job creation related to the wider labour market in the specific context of post-conflict economies.

Youth unemployment and violence: unpacking the linkage

While youth unemployment has obvious economic consequences, policymakers worry about youth unemployment for more than just its economic effects: in OECD countries, the marginalisation and social exclusion of young people who are ‘Not in Education, Employment or Training’ (NEET) are widely believed to result in a range of anti-social behaviours, such as petty crime, vandalism and drug abuse (Bynner and Parsons, 2002). Concerns for a ‘lost generation’ abound in the political debates and media, as more and more young people are slipping into the ranks of the long-term unemployed (OECD, 2008). To quote the title of an article in The Economist, a growing mass of jobless young people appear to be ‘looking for trouble’ (The Economist, 2011), and governments are frequently warned that they ignore the plague of youth unemployment at their peril. The image of a ‘ticking bomb’ is an often-used metaphor, indicating the inexorability of violence if youth unemployment is not tackled (Price, 2012). While most statements are expressed in gender-neutral terms, de facto the emphasis is predominantly on young males, who are seen as prime candidates for recruitment in violence (Munive, 2010, 326).

Many armed conflicts in Africa have been described, in policy documents, academic literature and the general media, as ‘crises of youth’ – a label that has been associated, in particular, with the conflict in Sierra Leone (Fanthorpe and Maconachie, 2010; Peters, 2011; Richards, 1995). The youth unemployment–violence linkage is often presented in straightforward terms – for example, the seminal 2006 report of the United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWA), entitled Youth Unemployment and Regional Insecurity in West Africa, argues that:

[Youth] unemployment fuels conflict and crime, both of which then, in turn, increase unemployment further by their effects on economic performance, investor confidence, and social, physical and institutional structures. (UNOWA, 2006, 8)

The notion that youth unemployment and violence are somehow related seems commonsensical, but the assumptions as to exactly how they are related remain largely untested. While significant literature exists on the negative impact of unemployment on individuals and societies (Ahn et al., 2004; Bell and Blanchflower, 2009; Clark et al., 2009; Luechinger et al., 2008; Knabe and Raetzel, 2007), research looking specifically at the unemployment–violence linkage has failed to reach any kind of
consensus. Many studies see no evidence of any direct linkage (Lin, 2008; Poutvaara and Priks, 2007), while some find a positive correlation between unemployment and property crimes (burglary, theft and shoplifting), but a much weaker link with other types of violent crimes (Baron, 2008). Other studies point out that there is, indeed, a correlation between the labour market and crime, but that an exclusive focus on unemployment is reductive – for example, studies conducted in the USA and the United Kingdom (UK) have found a link between worsened work conditions and an increase in crime (Gould et al., 2002, Grogger, 1998; Machin and Meghir, 2004).

Even if one accepts that unemployment is correlated to violence, it remains to be proven that youth unemployment poses more risks than unemployment in general (Carmichael and Ward, 2001). Attempts at assessing this linkage through quantitative studies are hampered by the fact that, as discussed above, ‘youth unemployment’ is an ineffable notion that defies easy measurement and cross-country comparison. In addition, existing studies focus almost exclusively on the USA and Europe, while virtually no comparable evidence-based research exists for African countries, in general, and post-conflict African countries, in particular (Cramer, 2010).

One limit of the scholarship of youth and violence is that it is mostly based on research and interviews with combatants or former combatants, who are asked about their motivation in resorting to violence; conclusions about the general youth population are then reached, proceeding backwards. Factors in relation to the resilience of young people who did not engage in violence are rarely studied in any detail. Therefore, it remains unclear whether a difference in work conditions can explain the difference in participation in violence.

Implications for programming

In sum, the frequently made argument that ‘youth unemployment causes violence’ lacks both nuance and predictive power. While there is evidence that high levels of youth unemployment are often seen in conjunction with higher levels of violence in society, the causality remains blurred and many questions remain unanswered – are there particular categories of young people that are particularly at risk of violence if unemployed? Is it unemployment per se that leads to violence or, rather, more broadly, the lack of socio-economic opportunities? Are unemployed young people more vulnerable to recruitment, compared to those who are underemployed or employed under exploitative terms?

Failure to address these questions at the analytical and policy levels trickles down to affect the design, implementation and evaluation of youth employment projects. First of all, it is unclear whether the objective is simply to create jobs or to create jobs that are specifically intended to promote peace and social cohesion. As recognised by the World Bank, there is a need to better understand the ‘shadow value’ of a job from
the point of view of social cohesion (World Bank, 2011).

Closely related is the question of who gets these jobs. Underpinning the ‘youth employment for peacebuilding’ paradigm is the idea that giving jobs to some young people will result in a decrease of the overall level of violence in society. Project documents typically speak of providing ‘young people’ with job opportunities, while skimming over the obvious, but essential, fact that only an extremely tiny fraction of young people actually benefit by any one project. The final evaluation of the Youth Employment and Professional Training in Guinea-Bissau concluded that the project: ‘targeted less than 1 per thousand of potential beneficiaries’ (Larrabure and Vaz, 2011, 18), with a very high cost per beneficiary, thus making it difficult to replicate. While project documents often state that a ‘catalytic’ or ‘multiplier’ effect is expected, how this is supposed to happen is left unspecified.

Across the board, project documents are remarkably unspecific when it comes to identifying criteria for beneficiaries, generally resorting to vague indications, such as ‘the most in need’ or ‘the most vulnerable’. For example, the above-quoted Guinea-Bissau project states that beneficiaries would be chosen by: ‘the precariousness of their situation, […] the exclusion from opportunities for employment and decent work, as well as their motivation and determination to become more autonomous’ (Larrabure and Vaz, 2011, 18). The National Youth Service Programme for Peace and Development in Liberia (December 2011 to March 2013) aims, among several other objectives, to develop employment opportunities for ‘at risk’ youth within small and medium enterprises; however, no specifications are offered as to how to identify these young people at risk. The joint evaluation on the youth employment project in Sierra Leone noted that:

[in general the projects […] mix their overall target between social objectives and employment. For example, several projects want to focus on the poorest people or the most vulnerable. However, this is not the segment of society that has the best prospects for sustainable creation of enterprises and employment. (UN et al., 2010, 8)

In post-conflict countries, where the majority of young people (or, indeed, the majority of the population at large) faces great hardship, generic indications of ‘need’ and ‘vulnerability’ are unhelpful in defining the target group. In the absence of any guidance, the identification of beneficiaries can unintentionally ‘do harm’ and become conflict-inducing, if it is perceived as privileging certain groups of young people at the expense of others.

A characteristic of many youth employment programmes is the implicit identification of ‘youth’ with ex-combatants, while, in fact, the latter represent only a small subset of the overall youth population. A review of youth employment projects carried out by the Youth Employment Network in West Africa found that a significant percentage of projects generically labelled as ‘youth employment’ in post-
conflict countries targeted only, or at least primarily, former combatants; in Liberia, it was over half of all the projects surveyed (Lopes and Pasipanodya, 2008, 8). While there may be good reasons to focus on this target group, it is important for policy and programming purposes to avoid the conflation of former combatants and youth at large. In other words – to use a distinction borrowed from public health literature – it is important to clarify whether youth employment projects are aiming at primary prevention (i.e. addressing the youth population at large, on the understanding that all young people can potentially turn violent); secondary prevention (addressing certain categories of young people, on the understanding that they are most likely to turn violent. Indeed, in this case, it is important to be explicit about who these categories are: catch-all definitions, such as ‘youth at risk’ and ‘vulnerable youth’, are unhelpful); or tertiary prevention (addressing young people that have already shown a propensity for involvement in violence, such as former combatants) (Brantingham and Faust, 1976).

Conclusion

Youth employment projects have become a popular peacebuilding measure, as the problem that they are trying to address is such an evident and unquestionable priority. However, recognising the gravity of the problem of youth unemployment and its likely connection to the risk of violence and instability does not, in itself, demonstrate that youth employment projects are the best way of tackling it or a cost-effective use of donor resources in post-conflict settings.

The premise of this article is that the success of ‘youth employment for peacebuilding’ projects should be assessed against two separate objectives: (1) whether they create jobs for young people; and (2) whether they reduce the risk of violence. These two objectives are generally seen as compatible and mutually reinforcing: because youth unemployment is assumed to cause violence, any intervention aimed at promoting youth employment is assumed to contribute in some measure, however small, to the reduction of violence and the promotion of peace. This argument is appealing in its simplicity, but also fallacious at various levels.

For a start, as discussed above, there is no evidence that youth employment projects in post-conflict societies manage to create long-term stable jobs. While the type of interventions that are funded by international agencies and donors in post-conflict countries are similar in content to ALMPs in Europe and the USA, their scale and ambition are far smaller, and the likelihood that any one intervention can have an impact on reducing overall unemployment in the country is minimal. Furthermore, even for those young people that actually benefit from the project, there is little evidence that the training and resources received have led to a long-term improvement of their professional status.
It could be argued that, even if youth employment programmes do not reach their first objective (job creation), they could still be successful against their second objective (promoting peace). In this regard, it becomes important to assess not only how many beneficiaries are reached by a project, but also who these people are. Many project documents present young people as a homogenous category, prone to violence in the absence of jobs and life prospects. It is a fact, however, that, in any given context, only a small number of the youth population engage in violence; indeed, most of them show great resilience in the face of extremely dire circumstances. In the words of Nicholas Argenti: ‘the remarkable thing to consider is not why some of Africa’s youth have embraced violence, but why so few of them have’ (2002, 150).

The pragmatic corollary of this consideration is that youth employment projects will not be successful towards their objective of reducing violence, unless they manage to target those people ‘at risk’. Conversely, one could argue that a project that manages to give jobs to young people who would potentially engage in violence can be successful against its peacebuilding objective, even if it does not create new jobs. In other words, the two objectives are not necessarily mutually reinforcing, and they could even be at odds with each other.

This article has argued that the practice of using youth employment projects for peacebuilding is rooted in untested, problematic and possibly flawed assumptions, and this fundamentally affects the chance of success for such projects. What is suggested here is not that the donors’ and international agencies’ focus on youth unemployment in post-conflict societies is misguided – in fact, quite the opposite. It is a truism that no peace can be sustainable without jobs for young people. However, in their current formulation, most ‘youth employment for peacebuilding’ projects lack a clear theory of change: the relation between the ultimate peacebuilding objective and the immediate goals of the project is left unspecified. This is a serious limitation, as youth employment projects are not ‘something for nothing’. In post-conflict countries, where resources are scarce compared with needs, decisions as to where to allocate them are crucial. The stakes are too high to afford to design and implement programmes on the basis of untested assumptions.

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Youth employment projects as a peacebuilding tool


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