The youth of Africa: A Threat to Security or a Force for Peace?

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Written by: Milton Mutto, Research and Programmes, Injury Control Centre, Uganda

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Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development
www.genevadelaration.org

Conference Background Paper
Introduction

In some countries the rapid growth of youth populations, combined with high levels of unemployment and rapid and uncontrolled urbanization, are seen by many observers to be correlated with violence. The likelihood of a violent onset is believed to be particularly acute in contexts where a large population of young people are coming of age in the face of unstable governments, insecurity and development challenges.

In such circumstances youth are more likely to band together in search of solutions and in some cases resort to violent means. In countries at war this often translates into young people being more susceptible to recruitment into armed rebel groups, either by personal choice or are coercively forced to join. Even in countries that are not formally in conflict, many young people, in particular young men, are drawn into gang activity and predatory activity, partly in response to a sense of marginalization and social and economic exclusion.

Although research on conflict and crime identifies the ‘youth factor’ as a crucial element in the generation or perpetuation of armed violence, it is important to recall that their participation reflects a broader societal crisis. Violence is a leading cause of death and injury in Africa, with small arms and light weapons posing a major threat to the lives of young people – whether in situations of armed conflict, in countries emerging from war or in dense urban settings.

Ultimately, the social and economic marginalization of youth aggravates their vulnerability, rendering them more susceptible to violent death. This paper examines the particular ways youth are affected by, and contribute to, armed violence. It reviews key risk factors that contribute to the phenomenon of youth violence, identifying examples of intervention programmes, and making suggestions for the way forward in addressing this very urgent and challenging problem.

A note on definitions

The term ‘youth’ can be interpreted differently depending on societal interpretation and culture. Although lacking a consensus based definition, the United Nations defines youth as individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 years. According to this definition, youth comprises approximately 18 percent of the world population (or more than one billion people), of which 85 percent live in developing countries. With the very low life expectancy currently in Africa, coupled with population growth, it is estimated that up to 50 percent of Africa’s population is under 18 years of age.

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2 UNDP 2006:11
4 UNDP 2006: 17
7 As cited in UNDP. 2006:12. Up to 48 per cent of the world’s population is under the age of 24, and many countries in Africa have predominantly young populations.
The gender dimension of youth

During the transition from childhood to adulthood, societal expectations and personal aspirations of young men and young women begin to diverge, where in many cases, ‘the world expands for boys and contracts for girls.’ These different experiences of youth by young women and young men have impacted both on the study of youth culture and the types of intervention programmes developed, with the focus almost exclusively on young men, often ignoring the concerns and experiences of young women.

Predominant gender norms have a considerable impact on the way that young people relate to violence – both as victims and as perpetrators – and on their capacity and willingness to act as agents of positive change.

As the World Bank states, “the subject of male identities, the link between masculinity and violence, the need to encourage a non-militarized masculinity and the particular positions of adolescent and young men require considerable attention in research, programme design and planning.” Often faced with little space to ‘grow up’ in a traditional sense (to get a job, get married, start a family), young men in many parts of the world are left with violence as the most readily available way of proving their manhood. Using violence to resolve conflicts is often valued and glorified, with more conciliatory attitudes being seen as ‘weak’ and warranting the accusation of not being ‘a real man’. The possession of small arms carries high symbolic value among youth in many societies, with associations of individual or group pride, empowerment, masculinity, belonging to a group, status and recognition.

This process of socialization into violence has strong implications in the way that male-female interaction is conceived and experienced. The idealized traits of “aggressiveness, ambitiousness, ruthlessness and confrontation”, contribute to legitimizing and normalizing violence as a means of dealing with women, and to compete with other men over women.

Dimensions of the Problem

As with other forms of armed violence, the lack of reliable data means that little is known about the true extent of youth involvement in violence. There are critical cultural, legal and political factors that discourage reporting of incidents. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that armed violence is one of the greatest threats to development in Africa, with the proliferation and misuse of small arms having imposed heavy social and economic costs on the continent. Recent studies by Oxfam-GB, for example, reveal that armed conflicts cost African economies on average US$18 billion a year. In addition, years of protracted armed violence have in some countries destroyed up to 70 percent of health networks. As youth makes up the majority of the population these findings impact on them considerably.

Youth and armed conflict

In the 1980s and early 1990s, it is estimated that 35 African countries were at war or engaged in armed conflict that directly or indirectly affected over 550 million people, with young people often the largest category of participants and victims of the various armed conflicts. Studies in Africa have shown that, although the level of involvement of young people in armed violence has varied from conflict to conflict, they have been involved in all armed conflicts and have been responsible for some of the worst atrocities ever committed on the continent.

Armed conflicts are notorious for promoting the involvement of young people as perpetrators, often resulting in them also becoming victims. In Northern Uganda, for example, children were specifically targeted for conscription into rebel ranks, marriage, and domestic labour. Many others are forced to join because of the need for food, shelter and medical attention, while others are abducted from schools or

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villages at gunpoint. By 1998, as many as 8000 Ugandan children had been abducted, and trained as rebel fighters, and many of them had been forced to commit brutal crimes and ritual killings, sometimes, on their own families. In most armed conflicts, young people are also denied their rights: many have had to live in abject conditions, sleeping rough or in churches or hospitals to avoid abduction into armed rebel groups or militia.

Protracted armed conflicts have also placed whole populations of youth at heightened risk of injury and infection with diseases like malaria and HIV/AIDS, including the possibility of long-term psychosocial and physical problems like post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD). Furthermore, disruptions to productivity, service delivery, and social order, which can be features of both armed conflicts and situations of urban armed violence, have created conditions that have either promoted violence or reinforced the use of violence as a societal norm in dealing with social and political crises or challenges.

**Youth and violent crime**

As in situations of violent conflict, easy access to small arms is a contributing factor to high levels of urban armed violence. A myriad of elements interact determining the involvement of young people as either perpetrators or victims of armed violence. These include social and economic deprivation and marginalization, exposure to violence in the home, lack of educational opportunities and demographic factors such as age and gender. In addition, important societal factors at the macro-level can exacerbate the involvement of young people in violence. These include cultural norms that support violence as an acceptable means of resolving conflicts, as well as norms that entrench male dominance and finally norms that support excessive use of force by police against citizens, and weaken the firearm regulatory frameworks.

Age and gender are some of the most important biological risk factors in the perpetration of armed violence and being a victim of armed violence: young men between the age of 15 and 29 years are most at risk of being killed with a firearm or using a gun to kill someone. In South Africa, for example, firearms are the leading cause of non-natural death, rising sharply from 14 years, and peaking at a constant high between 20 to 29 year age range.

The availability of and easy access to small arms is seen as a major risk factor in fueling armed violence. In Africa it seems to have taken a new twist: many families and communities now own them. In the Karamoja region of Uganda, for example, firearms have become household implements for protecting cattle. Among the Pokot pastoral communities of Kenya, they have replaced traditional spears and are used in raiding and for settling inter-clan scores. In other instances, research shows that firearms have increased the lethality of domestic violence. Being witness to such violence or subjected to it or any other abuse or neglect, conditions young people for later involvement in acts of violence. These factors combined with poor social support structures, such as a lack of parental supervision increase the risk for other forms of violence.

Other factors that exacerbate the link between armed violence and youth include the continent’s daunting post-independence history of socio-political change, severe unrest, and poverty. Young people are seen as particularly vulnerable during periods of socio-political unrest and struggle. Studies show that young people who have no access to legitimate employment are more likely to be drawn into exploitative or illicit activities, including conflict. Poverty has also been shown to be a factor in the creation of structural violence, with schools as one of the social institutions where young people often experience structural, psychological and physical violence, sometimes daily.

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17 Pinheiro 2006. UN Secretary General’s Report on the Study on Violence against Children.
18 International Labour Organisation Youth Employment Network. See www.ilo.org
Prevention Strategies

Over the last decade, the international community has increasingly identified young people as a target group for violence prevention programmes: they are seen as both a threat to peace and a force for peace. However, current programming seems to focus primarily on youth as a threat to peace, trying to reduce or ameliorate risk factors for violence, at the exclusion of seeing youth as potential agents of change in which their positive qualities such as their enthusiasm and often fresh, unbiased outlooks are underlined. This means that little attention is given to examining the factors that contribute to preventing young people from engaging in acts of armed violence, or violence in general, whether at an individual or collective level. This area is under studied and as a result this paper tends to focus primarily on programmes aimed at reducing the potential for young people to become threats to peace, rather than agents for change.

Tackling the negative effects on young people of engaging in armed violence requires specific actions which address individual, relational, community and societal risk factors, and which recognise the gender dimensions of youth violence. For example, UNDP’s youth programming for conflict prevention and recovery in Côte d’Ivoire and Liberia recognizes that the post-conflict period can open up spaces for renegotiating gender roles and relations, allowing and encouraging young women to perform non-traditional female roles.

Although youth violence prevention programming is relatively new, some key areas identified for interventions are: education; employment and job creation; empowerment and constructive political participation; and peacebuilding, conflict resolution and community dialogue. However, there are no standard and transferable youth violence prevention and control programmes: each situation is unique and must be treated as such. Prevention and control measures must be appropriately founded on sound scientific principles and prevention and control measures.

Schools-based programmes

Prevention programmes are often administered through family and school based programmes, these include:

- Recognizing the negative consequences of armed violence
- Equipping young people with alternative methods for resolving conflicts, including developing appropriate coping mechanisms
- Overcoming the traumatic effects of armed violence

Several such interventions are currently under development and review in Africa: examples include the Mato-Oput 5 programme piloted in Northern Uganda. This programme seeks to address the knowledge, attitudes and skill gaps that influence violent exposures, susceptibilities and consequences among at-risk children and is implemented through the formal school system. Other strategies include targeting the macro social and cultural environments that support the emergence of violent behaviour among young people including regulatory frameworks, and socio-cultural and economic environments that influence the way young people come to define their identity, opportunities and prospects.
Employment and job creation

The promotion of youth employment, combining elements aimed at increasing youth employability with direct employment creation, is seen as one of the interventions most directly connected to the prevention of armed violence. Most employment programmes adopt a two-pronged strategy: firstly, to provide rapid employment opportunities and income generation activities in the short-term in order to defuse the risk of violence, and secondly to develop medium to long-term strategies for sustainable youth employment and development.22

An example of an employment creation initiative is the Kenyan based Slums Information Development and Resources Centres (SIDAREC). SIDAREC serves hundreds of young people in Nairobi’s slums by providing services such as computer training, basic business skills, start-up loans for small enterprises, and HIV/AIDS prevention training.23

Deliberate effort needs to be placed on improving youth prospects through employment and education. Sound educational and macro-economic policies that address existing needs of vulnerable youth and young adults may be important for violence prevention generally, thereby ensuring their long-term educational and employment prospects.

Empowerment and constructive political participation

As noted earlier, young people’s experience of being excluded from political and community decision-making contributes to feelings of powerlessness and marginalization. Marginalized communities tend to resort to illegal means of making their issues get to the public agenda. A range of programmes are currently aimed at increasing young people’s political participation, including amongst others, supporting the establishment of youth networks; strengthening the capacity of young people and youth organizations to engage more successfully in advocacy efforts; supporting the work of youth NGOs by equipping them

22 UNDP 2007:4
23 www.sidarec.or.ke
to engage in democratic processes; and supporting the development of youth policies by government. Several countries now have special representation of young people on their important decision making organs such as the national and local legislative assemblies.

In Sierra Leone, for instance, the Youth Empowerment Act identifies and prescribes modalities for involving young people in decision-making processes. In another initiative aimed at giving young people a stake in the new political dispensation, urban youth were trained in voter registration and election monitoring. Search for Common Ground helped establish a national youth network in Sierra Leone, which continues to educate youth about voting.

Peacebuilding, conflict resolution and community dialogue

Many of the programmes under this heading are aimed at promoting social cohesion, social and political tolerance and acceptance of diversity, and encouraging a culture of non-violence. This has included youth camps specifically targeted at youth in ethnically-divided countries, trying to build trust among young people from different groups as seen in Burundi and Senegal's Casamance region. Another common and successful interventions is the use of sport for youth development and empowerment. Many of these youth violence programmes also involve strong partnerships with a range of national actors such as youth organizations, NGOs and relevant government ministries such as Sports and Culture.

Box 1 Youth councils and youth forums

In recent years, a favoured response by national and international agencies alike has been support to the creation or development of youth councils and youth forums. Taking many forms, they usually describe groups of young people who come together in committees to discuss issues relating to their communities. However, there is increasing evidence that youth forums are often an inappropriate way of engaging many young people. As pointed out by Hugh Matthews, adults establish many youth forums largely because they are perceived to provide tangible opportunities deemed to enable ongoing participation rather than because of demand from young people themselves. Based on the experience in Great Britain, the author suggests that many youth forums are flawed participatory devices, often obfuscating the voices of many young people in decision-making.

Youth forums are not necessarily representative. They can be exploited for purposes that have little or nothing to do with youth needs and aspirations. Such forums can also be gender-biased, especially because girls might feel more ‘represented’ by women’s organizations. Often, youth forums are not connected to decision-making in any significant way, so that they can result in frustrating ‘talk shows’ with little concrete results. Many participants of youth forums around the world have already an age (mid- to late-twenties, or even early thirties) that would allow them to participate in formal structures. Focusing on promoting youth forums can shift the attention away from the real barriers that impede formal political participation.


24 UNDP. 2007; USAID. 2005
25 USAID. 2005 see www.sfcg.org
26 Matthews/Limb (2003); Matthews (2001a; 2001b).
Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that the intersection between youth and armed violence is indeed a development challenge. With a genuine commitment to a strong development and poverty reduction agenda and with a strong focus on young people, Africa may be able to make significant progress in reducing armed violence. At the macro level, this may need to include a number of policy and strategic interventions which prioritize pro-poor investment policies; harnessing the inputs of the poor into government investment decisions; and investing in broad-based education, and basic skills training for young people. Several further suggestions are made for addressing this challenge:

- Although much of the analysis of armed conflicts across the world identifies the ‘youth factor’ as a crucial element in the generation or perpetuation of conflict, it is important to remember that the involvement of youth in criminal violence and armed conflict is a reflection of a broader societal crisis.
- In the interim, there is an urgent need to improve national data collection and management systems in order capture and present the exact magnitude of the problem, define the determinants and to inform interventions.
- Despite youth violence prevention programming being relatively new, there appears to be agreement on some of the key areas for interventions: education; employment and job creation; empowerment and constructive political participation; and peacebuilding, conflict resolution and community dialogue.

Suggested Readings

3. Ramphele M A, Adolescents and violence: Adults are cruel, and they just beat, beat, beat! Social Science and Medicine, Vol 45 (8), Oct 1997, 1189-1197.

Contacts

Paul Eavis
Adviser, Armed Violence Prevention
Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery
United Nations Development Programme
11-13 Chemin des Anémones, Chatelaine CH-1219, Geneva, Switzerland
Tel: +41 22 917 8269 Fax: +41 22 917 8060
Email: Paul.eavis@undp.org
Skype: Paul.eavis

Ronald Dreyer
Coordinator of follow-up “Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development”
Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the Office of the United Nations, Geneva 9-11 Rue de Varembeé
1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland
Tel: +41 22 749 2424 Fax:+41 22 749 2466
Email: Ronald.dreyer@eda.admin.ch

Salim Salim
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Old Treasury Building
Harambee Avenue
P.O. Box 30551-00100
Nairobi, Kenya
Tel: +254 20 318888 Fax:+ 254 20 240066
Cell: +254 724 203711
Email: ssalim@mfa.go.ke