

Effect of training & job creation on social norms regarding violence and atrocities

Employment programs show a small effect (**g = 0.1**) on reducing support for violence, although their impact on shifting social norms around violence varies across contexts.

Geographic region: Sub Saharan Africa, Middle East and North Africa

Effect: Small effect (g=0.1)

Confidence in study findings: Low (8 studies with 41 effect sizes) with inconsistent effect sizes

Short Summary

Employment-focused programs, including vocational training and business support initiatives, aim to improve economic security and foster social cohesion among high-risk youth in conflict-affected areas. Evidence from Liberia, Somalia, and Afghanistan indicates **mixed effects**. While some programs modestly reduced support for violence and engagement in illicit activities, others had little measurable impact. Overall, the pooled effect is **small**, suggesting that employment programs can contribute to shifting social norms around violence, but outcomes are context-dependent.

Long summary

The intervention

The studies evaluated a range of employment-focused interventions targeting high-risk youth in conflict-affected settings. Programs generally combined vocational training, business support, and in some cases, life skills or counseling. In Liberia, the Action on Armed Violence (AoAV) Agricultural Training Program provided residential training, counseling, life skills classes, and farm inputs to youth involved in illicit activities. In Somalia, the International Labour Organization's YES and Y4C programs offered vocational training, cash-for-work, and microenterprise support to at-risk youth, aiming to enhance economic inclusion and social cohesion. In Afghanistan, the UK-supported INVEST program provided vocational training to improve employment outcomes and economic optimism among young people in Helmand Province.

How the intervention is expected to work

These interventions are intended to shift social norms around violence through economic and social mechanisms. Stable employment and skills training reduce economic grievances that may otherwise lead to engagement in violence. Programs that integrate participants from different ethnic or tribal backgrounds aim to foster dialogue and social cohesion, potentially lowering support for violent movements. Economic opportunity and perceived responsiveness of authorities may also reduce the attractiveness of extremist or violent groups. The effectiveness of these interventions depends on the depth of economic benefits, program transparency, and participants' initial attitudes toward violence.

The evidence base

This cell includes impact evaluation studies set in Liberia (3), Afghanistan (3), and Somalia (1).

The review evidence

Both reviews indicate that training interventions generally improve employment outcomes, with one meta-analysis reporting a small standardized mean effect (SMD = 0.07)

Evidence findings

Overall, employment-focused interventions can modestly reduce support for violence, though outcomes vary by context. Programs that successfully combine economic support with social inclusion—such as vocational training and life skills programs in Liberia and Somalia—appear to foster reductions in engagement with illicit activities and support for violence. In other settings, such as Afghanistan, programs had little measurable impact on willingness to engage in violence. These findings suggest that while economic interventions can contribute to shifting social norms, effects are generally small and contingent on implementation, local context, and the extent of social integration components.

The impact evaluation evidence

There are 7 impact evaluations. Of these two papers are earlier versions of a later paper also included in the cell. Five study summaries are thus provided here:

Blattman and Annan (2011) and Blattman and Annan (2016) Specifically, the NGO Action on Armed Violence's (AoAV) implemented a programme of residential agricultural training combined with counselling and "life skills" classes. The target group were youth engaged in illicit activities of mining and logging who were seen as at risk of engaging in conflict. At the end of the training participants received farm inputs worth \$125. The NGO recruited 1100 high-risk men in 138 communities of which roughly half were assigned to the program on a random basis. Engagement in agriculture was of interest, with three-quarters of those assigned to the programme attending the training. Participants reduced their illicit activities by about 20%, though none abandoned them completely. Incomes rose by on average US\$12 a month. One-third of the participants did not receive the inputs because of supply issues, and so were promised future cash provided they stayed in the village. This group saw the largest reduction in illicit activities. A short war occurred during the study period. Participants were less likely than the control to have met with recruiters. The study is rated low confidence because of lack of information on power calculations.

Blattman (2014) evaluates a community education campaign on alternative dispute resolution (ADR) practices in Liberia, a country with weak formal institutions and high levels of property disputes and violence. The campaign aimed to promote informal dispute resolution skills, practices and norms to help parties reach self-enforcing bargains faster and at less cost than through the formal court system. The study used a randomized controlled trial design, with 116 communities randomly assigned to the treatment group and 130 to the control group. The intervention was implemented over 21 months, from March 2009 to November 2010, with communities randomly assigned to one of five phases. The study found limited evidence of changes in norms, with a small (4.3 percentage points) decrease in the likelihood of bringing money disputes to formal courts, but no significant changes in egalitarian attitudes or hypothetical dispute resolution approaches. The study is rated as high and medium confidence quantitative study.

Borino (2019) investigates the role of employment programs in reducing the willingness of individuals to engage in violence in Somalia. Specifically, it evaluates the impact of the International Labour Organization (ILO)'s "Joint Program Youth Employment Somalia" (YES) and "Youth for Change" (Y4C) initiatives on promoting stability and reducing support for violence

among at-risk Somali youth. The YES and Y4C programs are employment-focused initiatives implemented in Somalia, targeting youth at risk of engaging in violent activities. These programs provide vocational training, cash-for-work opportunities, and support for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). Although not designed explicitly for peacebuilding, their conflict-sensitive approach emphasizes inclusivity, transparency, and fostering social cohesion among beneficiaries in Bosasso (Puntland), Berbera (Somaliland), and Baidoa (South Somalia). The study analyzed data from approximately 200 participants to assess the impact of the YES and Y4C vocational training programs. Support for violence among beneficiaries significantly decreased, with those justifying violence for better services dropping from 16% to 6% and those endorsing violence for political causes falling from 37% to 27%. The study is rated as low confidence as it is before and after study design.

Kurtz (2015 and 2018) examines the effect of the UK-supported INVEST program, which offered vocational and technical training courses in nine technical vocational education and training (TVET) centres in Helmand Province in Southern Afghanistan from 2011. The programme was implemented by a US NGO, Mercy Corps. At the time of the evaluation 25,000 students had graduated from the programme of which nearly on-third were women. The study used propensity score matching to match recruits from February to April 2014 with successful applicants who had not yet started the programme. There was no effect on young people's willingness to use violence for political or other cause. The study is rated low confidence because of lack of information on power calculations.

Lyll (2019) The study assessed that how aid can affect individual attitudes toward combatants ("combatant support") in wartime. Study experimentally evaluated Mercy Corps' "Introducing New Vocational Education and Skills Training" (INVEST) program in Kandahar, Afghanistan. INVEST sought to improve the economic livelihood of marginalized youth in a setting marked by high unemployment, weak government presence, and ongoing insurgency using two familiar staples of hearts and minds programming: vocational training (TVET) and unconditional cash transfers (UCT). The study was designed as a factorial randomized control trial design. Our sample consists of 2,597 at-risk men and women who were deemed vulnerable. The findings suggest that the intervention created a "boom and bust" dynamic marked by an immediate spike in pro-government sentiment followed quickly by a sharp reversal that led recipients to report *increased* support for the Taliban, including greater willingness to donate financially to its cause. Third, beneficiaries who received the combination of vocational training and cash transfers reported increased support for the government up to 7–8 months after INVEST concluded. The study is rated low confidence due to high attrition.

Confidence assessment

Overall confidence is low, reflecting inconsistency in effect sizes across studies and low confidence ratings in all individual studies.

Link to review summaries

Lwamba (2022)

All studies may be accessed via the EGM.

Other outcomes of the study:

Social cohesion / Willingness to participate or help

Social cohesion / Feelings of trust & Acceptance of diversity

Social cohesion / Sense of belonging

Community and state governance / Government performance

Human security / Economic security

Human security / Food security & nutrition & Health security

Violence and atrocity prevention / Nature and scale of violence or atrocities