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What We Know about “What Works” in Youth Civic Engagement and Voice, Youth Organizations, Youth Leadership, and Civic Education

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Executive Summary

This literature review is part of USAID’s *Youth and Democracy, Human Rights and Governance (DRG) Research and Learning Project*. The objective is to seek answers to the broad question of “what works” in youth programming. The review focused on evidence of impact of interventions in four areas: youth civic engagement and voice, youth organizations, youth leadership, and civic education for youth. Particular attention was given to interventions in conflict and violence-affected areas and in the context of countering violent extremism. The following conclusions and observations are based on the review of the academic empirical literature published since 2000:

- There is some academic empirical work on the impact of interventions in youth civic education, and very little in the other thematic areas. Qualitative research methods, including case study analysis, have been the predominant method to assess the impact of interventions to promote youth civic engagement and voice, youth organizations, and youth leadership.
- This review was unable to identify academic studies of the impact of interventions in the listed thematic areas in conflict and violence-affected areas or in countering violent extremism.
- Case studies of youth civic engagement and voice, youth organizations, and youth leadership interventions emphasize the importance of preparing adults to include youth and to make space for and support their participation.
- Research on impact focuses on the benefits to youth (self-reported increased confidence, skills, and knowledge). Research on youth organizations and youth-

led organizing also focuses on benefits to the community in the form of improved service delivery. There is little evidence of the impact of interventions on governance and processes of decision making.

- Research on civic education shows that if taught effectively, civic education can improve civic knowledge, and perhaps change civic attitudes, but the impact on levels of youth civic engagement remains unclear.
- The literature highlights the importance of contextual factors that enable or constrain the potential impact of interventions in the four areas of youth programming.
- Many of the findings in this review are further reflected in and reinforced by the results of the Systematic Review conducted by Prof. William Dunn, the expert evaluator on this team. The Systematic Review, as he explains in his summary report and full report, provides a comprehensive overview of existing evidence in youth programming in the four DRG areas.

This review identifies several knowledge gaps and makes recommendations for moving forward.

Project and Methodology

The purpose of this project was to review the academic empirical literature to discover what is known about “what works” in youth civic engagement and voice as an input to evidence-based programming. In addition to looking at interventions to promote youth civic engagement and voice more generally, this project focused specifically on interventions to support youth organizations, youth leadership, and civic education for youth. Although it searched in particular for research on the impact of interventions in conflict and violence-affected areas and for countering violent extremism, little was identified. An expert on youth and an expert on governance each researched the academic literature for two of the four themes, interviewed experts in the field, and provided feedback on each other’s drafts. Their classical literature reviews present areas of consensus and debate in the fields. This brief integrates and summarizes the findings of the full reports; interested readers are referred to the full reports for more detail. In parallel, an evaluation expert conducted a systematic review of the literature in these areas to develop a statistically valid picture of the growth and state of the literature and its empirical findings. His findings are presented in an accompanying document.

The review focused on English language literature from the year 2000 forward published by scholarly journals. To the extent possible, the focus was on empirical studies that provide evidence of impact of a youth civic engagement intervention; and to a lesser extent, descriptive

studies such as cross-sectional studies and case studies. While case studies provide weaker evidence of “what works,” they pay close attention to the context of the interventions, include the voices of youth, and provide detailed analyses of the enabling or constraining factors for youth engagement.

Literature was identified by using relevant search terms in Google Scholar, by reference to works cited in published articles, and by using Google Scholar to identify articles that cite articles of interest. Google Scholar is a comprehensive index of scholarly work, including articles, reports, and books, that includes most free and subscription scholarly databases. Experts to be interviewed were identified from their published works and by recommendation of other experts.

Youth Civic Engagement and Voice

There is little consensus on the definition of basic terms, theories of change, desired or expected impacts, or ways these impacts should be measured. Although civic engagement may include illegal activities such as illegal protests, this document follows the main body of literature and focuses on *lawful activities by youth intended to be beneficial to the broader community*. Activities include community service, volunteerism, participation in and leadership of non-governmental organizations; and activities within the formal political system, including voting, running for office, and joining political parties. *Voice* refers to youth’s expression of their ideas, suggestions, or interests that can result in organizational, social, or political change.

The promotion of youth civic engagement is a political and social agenda that is not driven by an explicit causal theory. Youth civic engagement and voice is a desired outcome. There are a wide variety of programs that seek to achieve this outcome. These include support for youth-led organizations and youth wings of adult-led organizations, youth leadership programs, and civic education programs. Accordingly, the observations in this section apply to the discussion of the literature on youth organizations, youth leadership, and youth civic education.

Most programs to support youth civic engagement and voice focus on benefits to the youth themselves in terms of knowledge, skill, confidence, and relationship building. Other programs seek to create opportunities for youth to express voice; to elevate youth voice in the community and government; to benefit the community by tapping youth energy and ideas; or to divert youth from problem behavior. Sometimes the purpose of the activity is not clearly articulated.

Programs to promote youth civic engagement and voice are primarily conducted out of school by non-governmental organizations. Although there are some causal studies, most studies of youth programs are descriptive case studies that do not provide evidence of program impact, the size of impact, or the duration of impact. Case studies are often commissioned by or carried out by the organization conducting the youth program, introducing a risk of bias. Because of the variety of programs it is difficult to generalize from these studies to make statements about the

effectiveness of programming for youth civic engagement as a whole. However, the case studies suggest some prerequisites for youth participation that are necessary for program success.

Youth civic engagement and voice requires opportunity and support for youth participation. Echoing research on elite capture in participatory projects in development, research on youth civic engagement and voice suggests that youth participation does not happen without effort. Because adults are in a position of power and youth are marginalized, youth participation requires changes in adult behavior to create space for and encourage youth participation. This may require education or training of adults, and efforts to build a youth-adult partnership.

The literature describes a continuum of youth participation and leadership that captures struggles over power between youth and adults. Proposed by Roger Hart, the continuum presents the lowest forms of participation as tokenism and manipulation of youth. Higher levels of participation are typically referred to in terms of full citizenship where youth take on leadership roles while collaborating with adults. Where youth do not believe that their voice will be valued they may be reluctant to participate or they may disengage from participation.

Other factors may constrain opportunities for youth participation. Youth participation may be constrained by law (as where, for example, the law sets a minimum voting age). For youth who are still children, lack of parental permission may be a constraint to both youth participation in activities and youth participation in research on the effectiveness of interventions.

Finally, youth require the resources to participate effectively. One of the constraints flagged by program organizers is the limited time that youth have for participation, given school, work, and family responsibilities. Particularly for younger youth or youth in insecure environments, youth may require transportation to activities and the provision of security. Youth may also require knowledge and skills to participate. The literature on youth civic engagement and civic education discusses a “civics gap,” where youth of lower socioeconomic status have fewer opportunities for both civic education and civic engagement.

Youth civic engagement programs have also been advanced to counter radicalization of youth and their engagement in violent extremism. The theory of change is often not well articulated, but may include promoting greater attachment to the community, persuading youth to adopt counter narratives, or simply occupying the time of youth and crowding out less desirable activities.

This review found no empirical academic literature on the impact of these programs. This lack of evidence was confirmed by an expert in countering violent extremism. Demonstrating impact is likely complicated by the fact that few youths engage in violent extremism and there is no agreed upon profile of at-risk youth. Accordingly, programs are targeted more broadly (typically to Muslim youth) and so are likely to have small effects. In addition, although there are a few programs that are being run in schools (for example, in Australia and Saudi Arabia), most

programs are very small and run by small organizations without the resources to conduct sophisticated impact studies.

Most of the English-language research focuses on American youth, and to a lesser extent, European, Canadian, and Australian youth. There is very little academic empirical work on the impact of youth civic engagement interventions in developing countries or violence-affected areas, and the literature that exists is descriptive. Nevertheless, this research and expert interviews point to the importance of contextual factors that may affect program impact. The issue of context is addressed later in this report. This review found no academic literature on the impact of interventions to support youth organizations and youth leadership in conflict and violence-affected areas.

Because most youth programming and research approaches youth as a source of problems rather than as assets, we do not have sufficient knowledge about how youth are civically engaged and why they make the choices they do. Similarly, we do not have enough information about how either youth civic engagement or programs to support youth civic engagement differ by gender. Studies using survey data usually analyze differences in participant responses by gender, but the case studies do not.

Youth Organizations. One means of promoting youth civic engagement is through support for *youth organizations*—either organizations led by youth or organizations that seek to benefit youth and elevate their voice. These include youth councils and parliaments, youth in national parliaments, and youth wings of political parties, as well as youth-led community organizations.

Although interest in youth councils (YCs) and youth parliaments (YPs) is very recent, the promotion of these organizations is driven by the overall agenda of increasing youth participation in political decision-making processes and governance structures. YCs are typically attached to governments while YPs may not be. Also, YPs in Europe tend to target a young age group (12 to 16 years old) whereas in other countries, youth involved in parliaments are in their early to mid-twenties.

YPs are expected to fulfill a wide range of functions from participant political education and skills training to policy impact. Evidence of their effectiveness is lacking, especially in authoritarian environments. Even in the European and American contexts, on which the literature largely focuses, the evidence points to challenges rather than benefits. Challenges include the organizations' elitist and self-selective nature and their exclusion of the needs and priorities of the marginalized and hard-to-reach youth.

Youth councils, on the other hand, have attracted relatively more attention from researchers whose case studies provide interesting observations and analyses. In the U.S. and the U.K., for instance, YCs act as advisory or advocacy bodies to the government or development community. Youth elected to these structures are expected to identify youth priorities, design policies, and contribute to their implementation. Discussions of the benefits of YCs draw on individual

interviews with youth council leaders and members who self-report improved confidence in expressing their voice, higher level of self-esteem and self-worth, and improved political knowledge and leadership skills. Benefits, according to the literature, are in tangible improvements to neighborhoods and communities. The results discussed include improved service quality (particularly in the education sector), the provision of neighborhood safety, better school curricula, and transportation for students. Although some researchers point to the contribution of YCs to the better functioning of adult organizations, the evidence to support these claims remains thin. However, there is a consensus in the literature about the barriers that can limit the expected benefits of YCs. These range from individual barriers (skills, competencies and knowledge) to institutional and structural challenges including devaluing of and discrimination against youth (“adulthood”), and the manipulation of youth by adults for political reasons (“tokenism”). The literature suggests that unless these barriers are taken seriously and addressed, YCs will remain much like YPs, ineffective mechanisms for attracting and keeping youth engaged in governance. Engaging youth and sustaining their participation require major shifts in how adults understand and value youth participation, how they work on mentoring and partnering, and how they share decision making power.

To a large extent, many of the conclusions underlined above apply to youth in national parliaments and youth in political party wings. Youth participation in these formal political structures is expected to renew leadership and “reboot” and rejuvenate democracy. The literature is just beginning to explore implications and so there is little evidence about if and how youth have impact on the political process or policies. There is little focus on authoritarian contexts and the question of what incentivizes youth to join political structures and sustain their activities within hostile environments.

Youth-led organizations and youth community organizing are two areas of research and practice that are fast growing in popularity among various stakeholders but rather slow in producing evidence of impact. To date, the discussion is primarily theoretical and conceptual and focused on marginalized youth and their communities in the U.S. The literature shows a shift from a deficit approach to a focus on positive youth development and an increased focus on justice in access to resources. Youth-led community organizing brings together three fields: the tradition of community organizing, the principles of positive youth development with their focus on youth assets instead of youth deficits, and the field of youth development with its focus on providing services to youth at risk. This combination, as discussed in the literature, is anticipated to provide the marginalized and at-risk youth a rare opportunity to exercise their agency, reconnect with the community, and solve social problems. To date, the research on youth-led community organizing focuses on African-American and migrant youth using qualitative research methods. The literature suggests that it is relatively easier to assess impact in terms of individual gains (self-confidence and skills building) than to measure long-term impact on the community or governance structures. Here again, the literature is more articulate about the factors limiting the expected impact than the mechanisms that explain what works. Factors or challenges limiting

impact include the same structural and institutional ones limiting the benefits of youth engagement in general.

Youth Leadership. *Youth leadership* is both a skill to be developed for civic engagement and an outcome that is sought. Leadership skills are considered critical for the success of youth participation in political structures and for initiating change through youth-led organizations and community organizing. Training and forming a critical mass of leaders is expected to result in greater and more effective youth participation. The assumption here is that investing in youth as change makers leads to benefits for youth themselves and lasting positive impact on governance, security, and efforts to counter violent extremism. Yet, the existing research on youth leadership tends to disproportionately focus on short-term and individual benefits than on the long-term gains especially as these apply to governance.

In addition, much of the literature on youth leadership approaches youth as a problem (drug use, teen pregnancy, and school drop-out) and presents the teaching of leadership skills as a step towards fixing these problems. Hence, the assessment of the impact of youth leadership programs is defined by the problems fixed. By contrast, the definition of leadership that focuses on the political dimension of youth development is as recent as the positive youth development approach to youth. Hence, there is little research on what works in this context. In fact, there is little experience in assessing the impact of youth leadership on governance. What the literature suggests is that there is promise in the realm of short-term impact of leadership development on individuals' self-reported acquisition of skills, knowledge and competences.

Civic Education. *Civic education* refers to any educational initiative that purposefully seeks to promote the knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, and behaviors desired of citizens. Civic education for youth has been advanced to strengthen democracy by increasing youth political participation and civic engagement and to establish a pattern of engagement that will last throughout adulthood.

Unlike the other youth civic engagement interventions discussed in this note, most civic education for youth takes place in school. Civic education is a component of the curriculum for U.S. and European secondary students and research on civic education in English focuses on these students and programs. Because of the wide adoption of civic education programs and the availability of large-scale survey data, there is a body of empirical academic research on civic education consisting primarily of cross-sectional studies. There are also a small number of more recent studies using experimental or quasi-experimental methods that can provide stronger evidence of impact.

When taught effectively, civic education increases youth's civic knowledge, although the effect appears to decrease over time. More longitudinal studies of the effect of civic education are needed.

One area of focus of civic education research has been to identify effective program components and teaching techniques. Studies of U.S. high school students show that interactive teaching, and in particular, open and respectful discussion of controversial issues, is more effective than lecture. Other interactive and experiential learning exercises such as visits to government offices, simulations, or debates engage students in the material but there is no strong evidence of their impact on student learning.

There is a growing focus on the inclusion of out-of-school activities for civic education as part of the school curriculum. Many U.S. schools have adopted “service learning,” in which classroom work is combined with directed community service and reflection on that experience. The variation in the focus and quality of service-learning programs makes it difficult to generalize about the effectiveness of this approach in promoting youth civic engagement. There have been few impact studies, and these show mixed results. While service-learning programs focus on community service, broadly defined, the emerging field of “action civics” involves youth in an actual campaign to make political or social change. However, there is no consensus on what impacts are expected of action civics programs or how they should be measured.

A principal objective of civic education is to increase civic and political participation, but the relationship between civic education and increased participation is not well-established. One expert interviewed for this project suggested that USAID question the assumption that civic knowledge leads to participation. Other studies have focused on the impact of civic education interventions on youth’s attitudes about themselves, others, and their communities and show mixed results. There is evidence that civic education can improve the self-confidence of youth in their ability to engage politically. However, some experiential learning programs have reported a drop in participant self-confidence when social and political change proved unexpectedly difficult and slow. This suggests that caution should be exercised to ensure that programs do not seek to build unrealistic expectations.

Civic education programs are only one influence on youth civic knowledge, attitudes, and behavior, which are also shaped by family, peer groups, media, religious, and social communities. One research question is the importance of civic education interventions in shaping behavior compared to these other influences. Some studies have found that civic education programs can have the largest impact on students of low socioeconomic status because these students have fewer outside opportunities in which to learn civics. A few studies continue to report gender gaps between boys and girls in civic engagement and attitudes, but the gap in civic knowledge reported in earlier studies appears to have closed in the U.S. and Europe.

Context Matters

The existing academic empirical research focuses primarily on the U.S. and Europe. One of the largest research gaps is therefore the identification of contextual factors that can affect program

impact. There are few youth civic engagement interventions that have been carried out, much less studied, in multiple countries. Experts interviewed stressed that these interventions are heavily dependent on local dynamics and contexts, and so research findings should be treated as hypotheses to be explored in other contexts, rather than as general truths.

Factors that may affect program impact include characteristics of the youth themselves. These include their age, gender, and socioeconomic status; their level of education and reading level; their political socialization; their attitude toward and relationship with adults, including those implementing the program; and their exposure to other messages about civic engagement from family, media, religious organizations, or community organizations.

They also include characteristics of program implementers. In civic education, for example, these include teacher ability and experience, including training in interactive teaching methods; whether teachers feel free to innovate in their curricula; and whether teachers feel comfortable discussing controversial issues openly, including entertaining critiques of the government. In youth organizations, the nature of the youth-adult relationship seems to be one of the core factors determining the levels and sustainability of youth participation as well as the impact participation can have.

Environmental factors may also affect program impact. For school-based programs, one expert raised the question of the conditions of the educational system, including teaching training and resources, and the security of students in school from teacher predation and corporal punishment. Other factors suggested by experts include differing levels and conceptions of democratization; differences in recent political history such as the length of democratic experience, democratic backsliding, or history of authoritarianism; and the presence of current or recent conflict.

Because of the large number of factors that can affect program impact, including idiosyncratic local dynamics, surveys may fail to capture the most important impacts of programs or the reasons for them. Accordingly, several civic education experts interviewed for this report felt that randomized controlled trials, which in this field typically rely on surveys, are not the most effective method for evaluating program impact.

Conclusion

This report concludes that the academic empirical literature does not provide a basis for answering the question of “what works” in youth civic engagement and voice, youth organizations and leadership. There is limited academic empirical work on the impact of youth programming on individuals, organizations, and institutions. The literature does not establish causal links between the impact of interventions on the individual and the long-term impact on governance. There is very little empirical work on the effectiveness of different program components. There is more evidence on the impact of civic education interventions, but the link

between civic education and youth civic engagement and voice remains unclear. Many of these findings are further reflected in the results of the Systematic Review conducted by the expert evaluator on this team, Prof. William Dunn.

Where the literature is more successful or useful is in generating hypotheses and pointing to existing knowledge gaps. Based on the literature review, the sections below provide important questions for further research and recommendations for USAID to consider for its investment in youth programming in DRG.

Open Questions. The following is a sample of questions emerging from gaps in the literature

- How are youth civically engaged, and why? What individual factors make it more likely that youth will choose the desired path of civic engagement, compared to non-engagement or other ways of engagement?
- What other influences shape the civic attitudes and behaviors of youth, and what messages do they convey? Who are the providers of civic engagement and civic education intervention, how are these interventions provided, what messages are prioritized, and how are they adapted to particular contexts? How do youth respond to these different messages and providers? How do characteristics of program implementers and implementation affect impact?
- What is the impact of these interventions? What is the different impact of programs on youth given their age and gender? What is the long-term impact?
- What environmental factors affect program impact? What local or country-specific factors are likely to affect the opportunities for youth civic engagement, the choices of youth with regards to different types of civic engagement, the effectiveness and quality of their engagement, and the risks and consequences of their engagement?
- What predicts youth engagement in violent extremism? How might preventive interventions be better targeted to those at risk? How can impact be evaluated?

Be Explicit. Given the paucity of evidence on program impact, USAID should approach its work in this field with explicit learning objectives. This includes taking care to articulate clearly the desired program outcomes, theories of change, and assumptions, by answering questions such as:

- What types and qualities of youth civic engagement and participation are to be promoted, and why?
- Who is the target group for this intervention? Why? And how can it best be reached?
- What other conditions or interventions must be in place for this intervention to produce the desired outcome?
- Who will implement the intervention and what resources and constraints will shape their delivery?
- What contextual factors affect a) the opportunities for youth participation, b) the ways youth choose to participate, c) the quality of their participation, d) the effectiveness of

their participation, and e) the likely consequences of their participation for themselves and their community, including the likelihood of retaliation or harm?

- How can these impacts be best evaluated?

Design for Learning. Programming for learning would also involve engaging monitoring and evaluation specialists from the inception so that they can help design programs that are amenable to subsequent evaluation and learning. If, as experts report, the field is highly dependent on contextual factors, a search for “best practice” templates will not be fruitful. Instead, the objective should be a program of iterative learning to identify factors that make a difference for program impact and that should be considered in program design in order to develop a program that is the “best fit.” Programs should be designed to allow for the study of the effectiveness of different program components. Given the importance of context, survey-based evaluations, including randomized controlled trials, should be informed by ethnographic work in a mixed-methods approach. Longitudinal studies should be conducted to evaluate the long-term impact of interventions, given that the objective is to shape long-term behavior. Finally, some mechanism is needed to ensure that what is learned feeds into future program design.

Leverage Existing Resources. In addition, USAID can leverage existing resources. Academics have incentives to analyze data and publish papers, but often lack access to data. Program implementers have data, but often lack the resources and knowledge to collect and analyze it. USAID could provide small grants to academics and implementers to allow them to work together to collect data that would then be made publicly available. Because these would not be USAID-funded program evaluations and because other resources are available to academics (for example, for salary coverage), this would be a cost-effective way of increasing the amount of available evidence and analysis. Larger grants to implementers would likely be required to facilitate impact evaluations, as these would require program implementers to change the way they design and administer programs.