Youth Resilience to Violence in Africa

Contrary to dominant current conversations that portray the youth as violent, and despite young people's experiences of social exclusion, powerlessness and stigmatisation, and the attendant dislocation, studies show that the majority of young people avoided engaging in violence. Yet, there is little knowledge and analysis about youth responses to violence across Africa. A key aspect of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) research is filling the knowledge gap and devising more appropriate policies to prevent and counter youth engagement in violence.

A. SUMMARY

Despite the overriding view that they are prone to violence, youth in many contexts have demonstrated considerable skill and adaptation to non-violent methods. The overarching explanation offered for this ability to adapt and cope with violent situations in ways that still produce positive outcomes, including self-advancement, is 'resilience'. The term 'resilience' is thus coined to reflect the positive orientation around capacities for non-violent means. A core value of assessing resilience lies in uncovering the assets, attributes, qualities, resources, and actions embedded within individuals and societies which can potentially serve to connect each other to resist the proclivity to engage in violent activities. Resilience takes shape at different levels and is determined by socialisation, norms and values. The less socialised the individual is, the less his or her ability to escape violence. Differences in culture, family traditions and personal abilities notwithstanding, self-advancement remains, as the case-study of Uganda attests, the overarching motivation among those who do not fight. Self-advancement is however very much linked with self-regulation.

All demonstrate that resilience is a dynamic, multidimensional, responsive process. Adaptation, decision making, and proactive action were the most influential internal factors while peer influences and family are the most important external factors that influence resilience among the youth, followed by self-regulation and problem-solving by individuals and groups who choose not to fight. The Eastern and to some extent West African case studies show Resilience, Relationships, Self-Advancement as a motivation for Resilience, Relationships, Social-Bonding and Self-Advancement(RRSS)influence non-violent responses. Central to all are opportunity structures such as education. To the extent that opportunity structures are central to the external factors of resilience, there is absolutely a global dimension to this as intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations have a critical role to play. The research reports clearly illustrate the social-ecological factors that influence different forms of resilience and why when given a meaningful support young people construct peaceful pathways for change. This brief draws attention to the capacities, assets, and attributes of youth to avoid engagement in violence.

B. THE PROBLEM

Notwithstanding young people's experiences of social exclusion, powerlessness and stigmatisation, and the dislocation around them not all young people fall into violence, and some of those who do so at some point in their lives do manage to get out of it. Beyond avoidance, there is talk of resilience approach to youth violence prevention, hence peacebuilding. This also includes the resources, capacities and actions of ordinary people that contribute to sustainable peace. The need

to study youth contributions to peace is the message at the core of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2250 and the Global Study on Youth Peace and Security being undertaken at the United Nations. There is a range of factors that combine to influence the youth from participating in violence, and instead prefer to remain resilient through adaptation to adopt non-violent methods. Yet, little knowledge about youth-specific approaches, behaviours, mechanisms, tools that they employ as alternative responses to cope with and to respond to violent situations. This perpetuates the reality that the ideas and roles of young people have been peripheral to global and regional thinking about peace and security in their respective countries and the continent at large. Many of the underpinning ideas and processes of peace in African societies have been youth-led but often fall below the radar of the State. A resilience-based assessment approach to youth violence is quite a recent addition. Indeed, vulnerability and propensity of the youth to violence dominated research until the early 1980s. However, resilience is fast dominating the peace and development discourse. There has been some concern that the notion of resilience has become a new catchphrase, used as a substitute to old ideas across several fields. Yet, how to efficiently shape youth policies to include resilience remains unclear. One main challenge is to facilitate a deep understanding of resilience through shared definitions. We lack a coherent and shared definition partly because resilience "remains a broad and imprecise concept". It is a moving target both positional and relational, forward, and backward looking shaped by, and responsive to, context and proximity. Yet, the list is so diverse and cannot be reduced to a single quantitative measure or index in any given context that one may legitimately question whether all the types of resilience it itemises belong within a single frame of analysis. Therefore, from a conceptual, as well as practical perspective, it is essential to understand all the forms and manifestations of resilience, as well as how they relate to each other. This raises a larger question that needs to be answered, i.e., whether resilience is a concept, a framework of analysis or an operational blueprint. If resilience is indeed to help in this, then rather than this being left as implicit, we need to fully understand what is unique and particular about resilience in relation to youth and notions of peace, and how this manifests itself in different country contexts at

different points in time.

C. RESEARCH FOCUS

The IDRC's pan-African initiative on *Understanding and Addressing Youth Experiences with Violence, Exclusion and Injustice in Africa* supported 14 research projects in 12 African countries aimed at filling the knowledge gap and devising more appropriate policies to prevent and counter youth engagement in violence. However, this synthesis report is chiselled out from the various research materials mostly anecdotal in character, the rationale being to capture comprehensively the range of issues surrounding the capacities, assets, and attributes of youth to avoid engagement in violence. Particularly useful are the youth-specific non-violent pathways collated from research reports in two countries, Senegal, and Burkina Faso in West Africa and two districts of Uganda, in Eastern Africa and Zimbabwe in Southern Africa. The most relevant include "Why They Don't Fight: Explaining Non-Violent Responses to Discrimination, Exclusion and Injustice among the Youth in Uganda" and report on "Youth and Resilience Strategies to Violence and Crime in West Africa: Cases of Burkina Faso and Senegal", "Youth Inclusive Mechanisms for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Region: Case Studies of Uganda and Kenya" and a study titled "Active Engagement, Social Innovation and Resilience Among Young People in Zimbabwe." What makes some youth resilient as opposed to others who are vulnerable to injustice and violent conflict? What is it that helps them anticipate risk, resist violence individually or collaboratively and promote non-violent pathways? These fundamental questions have influenced the research reports and still persist as a major challenge in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by youth.

As part of a continuous effort to make sense of things this synthesis brief has also consulted additional studies on the subject. These comprise Interpeace's "Assessing Resilience for Peace: Guidance Note", excerpts from acknowledged but sometimes obscure masterpieces like "Whose violence, whose security?" by Robin Luckham and UNSC Resolution 2250. The synthesis brief integrates the various research and

synthesis reports to better understand all the forms and manifestations of resilience, as well as how they relate to each other.

D. SUGGESTIONS

1. Focus on opportunity structures

The link to **Education** as part of a wider opportunity structure and a transversal issue is readily highlighted as key to prevent youth from switching to violence. UN resolution 2250 (2015) also urges member states to support, as appropriate, quality education for peace that equips youth with the ability to engage constructively in civic structures and inclusive political processes. **Formal** and **informal** learning tools and opportunities appears to be the first factor (more mentioned in Uganda and Burkina Faso than Senegal and Zimbabwe) to create awareness and guide the youth to constructive pathways preventing young people from becoming violent. Central to all are opportunity structures. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and State duty bearers should facilitate an inclusive and enabling environment in which youth actors—including youth from different backgrounds—are recognised, and provided with adequate support to implement violence prevention activities and support social cohesion. Similarly, the **economic stability** of the household and the monitoring of misbehaviour would have a positive effect on the young person's entry into violence. Policy and development programming by states and communities have critical role in bolstering pursuit of self-achievement among the youth.

2. Acknowledge the environmental, cultural, and community-based factors that might influence resilient responses

Adaptation and social bonding are some of the agency-based mechanisms that influence non-participation in violence. Resilience is determined by socialisation norms and values. It is particularly culturally constructed. The values stemming from the cultural socialisation in which other parenting and community figures play a key role in the broadest sense constitute the fundamental resource of the young person's ability to cope with violence.

3. Include customary institutions

Customary institutions have particularly strong influence in preventing and countering violence as studies showed in Burkina Faso, Senegal, and Tanzania. The "Joking relation systems" within communities which curb the use of violence and recommend peaceful conflict resolution approach between allied social groups, the prominent role of religious figures and traditional chieftaincy in conflict resolution and the *"Nyumba Kumi"* in Tanzania which is a kind of early warning mechanism against violence lay down the foundations of a cultural institutionalisation of resilience.

4. Assist youth participation in social and economic life

When given a meaningful arena for participation in social, political, and economic life, youth are vital contributors to the rebuilding of communities, and more just and peaceful societies. All the reports draw some attention to disconnects between the State and the larger society, particularly the youth and these points of disconnect is critical for two reasons. The State is largely silent on the need to build youth resilience to violence. The role of the State is critical because from an interventionist standpoint, integrative approaches to develop and implement inclusive policies to redress social, political, and economic disparities and grievances over deprivation can also safeguard against participation in violence.

5. Support youth democratic inclusion

The world's youngest countries are all in Africa, yet little is done to provide the pivot for youth democratic inclusion, whose participation in normal politics will largely depend on whether they see their voices sufficiently reflected in the political process and its outcomes. Youth participation is a prelude to empowering them to overcome exclusion and injustice, build community, remedy a range of social problems, and by extension achieve transformative resilience. From this point of view, understanding whose voice is being heard among the youth and to what effect, becomes critical.

6. Apply a systems approach

The resilience of young people manifests not only in their agency, but also in their participation and ownership in peacebuilding initiatives within the wider community and beyond. Through these descriptions, a systems approach becomes essential, not merely a set of attributes, qualities, actions, or capacities detectable at each of these different levels of society, but rather, resilience to violence is significantly shaped by the connectors and the relationships between its presence at these various levels – as part of a wider (ecological) system.

E. CONSIDERATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The debate and analysis on resilience brings to the fore several critical issues for further research and interrogation which are important and obviously cannot be ignored.

The linkages with opportunity structures such as the economy or the value of education makes it more critical to focus on broader political economy aspects. Both violence and resilience take shape in different political economies. It is regrettable at this level that a structural factor of violence as important as that related to politics has not been summoned in this framework of analysis. This is although the economic environment continuously threatens to erode youth resilience. A major problem is however the structural requirements for resilience particularly its transformative variant. The distinctions between absorptive, adaptive, and transformative forms of resilience are analogous, albeit not equivalent to the varying notions of peace and violence on the one hand and linkages with the State on the other. This is where the main weakness of the study reports lies. Some young people (Zimbabwe) argue that what they are doing is simply coping, rather than being resilient. Some make the distinction between being resilient and just tolerating: 'there is no resilience but rather tolerance'. Following from this, resilience not only weakens the capacity to press for change, but it can also reinforce new forms of disempowerment and exploitation. Besides, the current context of assessing resilience requires an additional layer of analytical complexity embedded in the youth-State relationship between the resilience spectrum and the violence spectrum. Understanding is

needed of how violence works and for whom? Resilience should not be seen as an endorsement to perpetuate exclusion, injustice, and inequalities, hence the question resilience or resistance? It is often argued that 'structural' or 'silent' violence is as disempowering and constraining as direct physical violence. Like resilience, violence is a contested term. Both are relational concepts, most importantly to the State. Resilience becomes the ending of overt violence, without necessarily transforming the conditions that gave rise to it. At one level, this approach fails to isolate resilience to violence from the particularities of State violence. At another it ignores the fact that violence is also a form of conversation mainly when the State is repressive. Thirdly, there is a danger the recommendations trivialise both violence and resilience.

The studies focus less upon State responsibilities than upon the State being the incubator of violence itself, notably when civic space is curtailed, and security policies are repressive. From this perspective it is not clear why research on resilience does not include mechanisms for youth deterrence against State violence. The more so because youth protest movements are emerging as permanent features in the continent, a least understood phenomenon. Governments themselves are risk factors for resilience. Most governments impose clear limits on what young people can do and their freedom to organise publicly by restricting civic space or closing public spaces. Absent is the pressure on decision-makers to respond to their concerns and in creating alternatives to violence. A core value of assessing resilience lies in uncovering the nature of State violence. The potential of this approach has therefore not yet been fully realised.

All the reports draw some attention to disconnects between the State and the larger society, particularly the youth and these points of disconnect require further investigation, at two levels. The State is largely silent on the need to build youth resilience to violence. The role of the State is critical because from an interventionist standpoint, integrative approaches to develop and implement inclusive policies to redress social, political, and economic disparities and grievances over deprivation can also safeguard against

participation in violence. The framework should be of value to anyone looking to integrate the State as an actor of violence and notions of peace and agency of the youth across all levels of analysis, including methodological and conceptual frameworks. This is particularly critical to issues surrounding positive and negative peace and transformative nature of resilience. And given the nature of the African State, Africa-wide research on resilience should have provided more focus for State-society relations. A recurring gap in all the studies is the failure to establish a baseline understanding of the opinions, expectations and ideas of future peace and security among the youth. Positionality is crucial, as peace looks very different when seen by the rich, privileged; and when experienced by majority of youth, especially those who are vulnerable to day-to-day exclusion and violence. What young people themselves define, experience, and try to ensure their own understanding of peace is critical in determining forms of resilience. There is a double deficit here. Little knowledge of how the youth—leaders of the future that will inherit and address the security challenges in Africa today—understand or can effectively craft their role as agents of their own understanding of peace, and second the failure to envisage them as future leaders, and by implication focus and investments on African youth. Only by listening to them can the grip of dominant State and security-centred paradigms over analysis and policy be broken.

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