Investing in Quality Education for Development, Peace and Stability

BACKGROUND READING

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Introduction

Education is the foundation of any society: it prepares people to live cohesively in a community, to participate politically, and to contribute economically. At the individual level, education can improve employability, earnings, and health outcomes of people. Globally, education has the potential to transform economies through economic growth, innovation and building a strong foundation for social cohesion. Experience shows that countries that have invested in secondary and tertiary education have been able to take a lead in creating new information, products and technologies (Barro and Lee 2010). Data provided by the World Economic Forum shows that investing in education is necessary to protect economies from sudden shocks and rapidly changing labor markets. In sum, education is a powerful enabler of development, peace and stability.

Over that last 50 years, developing countries have made significant gains in access to education. However, some regions have been lagging behind, mainly sub-Saharan Africa, where literacy rates are below 50% among the youth. Moreover, the quality of schooling remains a challenge, that is despite being in school, "a child will not become literate or numerate, or will fail to acquire critical life skills. As the World Bank's 2018 World Development Report stated, "*schooling is not the same as learning."* As many as seven out of every 10 children today are unable to read and understand a simple text by the age of 10 (UNICEF, UNESCO, World Bank, 2022). Children are not attaining essential reading, writing and math competencies and these learning shortfalls have negative repercussions for youth entering the workforce. Failure to invest in foundational learning for children often leads to intergenerational transmission of poverty and vulnerability.

Given competing global crises such as the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change and Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine, the importance of investing in access and quality education has fallen off the policy radar but is more important than ever. A new narrative is needed to refocus attention on the topic, one that connects development, education and security actors in a more focused dialogue. CSIS is convening this roundtable discussion to explore new approaches to support investments in education and to transform the narrative around this important topic. The following short paper provides an overview of educational trends, and a summary of the literature linking education to development, inclusion, peace and stability. It serves as a background document to inform the discussion and provide some ideas of where the new narrative could emerge.

Current Educational Challenges

The Covid-19 pandemic reversed many of the educational achievements that developing countries experienced since 2000. According to UNESCO, more than 1.5 billion students and youth around the world have been impacted by school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic, with significant learning and earning losses common across all economies. The pandemic has affected children's formative years and will impact the economic potential of countries. As a result, the World Bank estimates that pandemic-related education deprivations put this generation at risk of losing $21 trillion in potential lifetime earnings.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, learning poverty (ie. being unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10.) was very high: 57 percent of children in low- and middle-income countries could not read and understand a simple story by the end of primary school. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the rate was 86 percent. School closures during the pandemic indicate that global learning poverty could reach an estimated 70 percent. This means that the pandemic wiped out all the gains in learning poverty that low- and middle-income countries recorded since 2000. Moreover, many countries decreased the level of education spending at the onset of the pandemic. According to data from Education Finance Watch (2022), "forty percent of low income and lower middle income countries reduced their spending on education after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, with an average decline in spending of 13.5 percent."

Against this backdrop, the world is also experiencing demographic shifts where some regions are experiencing a rapidly aging population, while others have a very large proportion of youth. Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are regions undergoing a very high population growth. According to UN estimates, more than half of global population growth between 2022 and 2050 is expected to occur in Africa, and in particular, the population of sub-Saharan Africa is projected to double by 2050. A troubling trend is that most of these new generations are born in geographies mired in violence and conflict with many competing development challenges: insurgency, disease outbreak, displacement of people, and regional instability. According to the OECD, there are 60 countries classified as fragile contexts, of which 40 are in Sub Saharan Africa and MENA.[1] While these countries only account for a quarter of the world's population they house three-quarters of people living in extreme poverty worldwide. By 2030, 86% of the world's extreme poor will be living in these fragile contexts.

[1] The OECD characterizes fragility as the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacity of the state, systems and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks. Fragility can lead to negative outcomes, including violence, poverty, inequality, displacement, and environmental and political degradation. Fragility is measured on a spectrum of intensity and expressed in different ways across economic, environmental, political, security and societal dimensions, with a sixth dimension –the human dimension--- added in the States of Fragility 2022.

Education as the Foundation for Peace and Stability

In these fragile contexts, almost three-quarters of the population is under the age of 30. Young people have big hopes and ambitions for the future; moreover, they possess the enthusiasm and potential to contribute in meaningful ways to their communities and economies. This is an opportunity to provide these new generations with quality education and opportunities for dialogue and understanding so they are adequately trained and feel empowered to find solutions to the world's most complex problems at the community, national and global levels.

Investing in quality education is an important enabler to building strong economies and peaceful and stable societies. Education institutions should prepare and equip young people with the skills needed to transition to the labor market. Numerous studies establish the positive link between increased human capital and economic outcomes such as higher wages, rates of labor participation and growth in gross domestic product (GDP). Investments in human capital include, for example, primary and secondary education, universal health coverage and social transfers. Higher levels of human capital can also help strengthen social cohesion and build more peaceful and inclusive societies.

Acquiring the right set of skills is not only important for workforce readiness: it is also vital to fostering more open, inclusive, and stable societies. Education promotes peace and stability when the children and young people have equitable access to quality education, through content and tools (like technology) and acquiring socio-emotional and life skills. In an era of rapid technological change, it is imperative for youth to learn and use digital technologies—both hardware and software—safely and appropriately. Digital literacy is now, per the World Economic Forum, part of the twenty-first-century toolkit and can contribute to building stronger democracies though citizens engagement and participation via digital tools such as the internet, and mobile apps. With the rise of digital authoritarianism, the spread of misinformation, and disinformation, equipping young generations with strong digital skills can contribute to building more open societies.

> *"Education is, quite simply, peacebuilding by another name. It is the most effective form of defense spending there is."*
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> *------Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, 1999*

However, in many of the fragile and conflict settings, young people lack economic and educational opportunities to realize their full potential. For many children and youth, these aspirations remain a dream. Children that live in fragile and conflict-affected countries are more than twice as likely to be out of school compared with those in countries not affected by conflict. Globally, nearly 75 million young people were unemployed in 2021. Most worrisome is that a cadre of young people are not engaged in education, employment or training (NEET) (282

million youth) and are often unemployable due to a lack of opportunities and resources.[2] Often, it's not a choice. At the same time, many young people, even the highly educated, are underprepared to tackle current labor market needs. Graduates are struggling to find jobs that meet their expectations, and many are underqualified to fill their desired positions because of a lack of job-ready skills that employers increasingly value and require.[3] In many countries, the current education system and training institutions are not in sync with the needs of the labor market. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, university graduates make up 30 to 40 percent of the total unemployed pool.[4]

For many youth, education may be a source of frustration rather than a promise of employment and higher earnings.[5] These deprivations can alienate youth from their desire to contribute to society. Research has identified "relative deprivation" (i.e. defined as the absence of opportunities relative to expectations) as one of main factors for radicalization where lack of good jobs for educated people can often lead to frustration and hopelessness.

There is a link (not a causation) between unemployed youth, youth bulges and violence.[6] Youth that are unable to engage fully in the labor market can be targets of international gangs or terrorist groups or recruited as child soldiers. Also, young people are those most eager and willing to migrate to countries with better economic opportunities.[7] A handbook by the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime shows that children that are not in school are most vulnerable to crime and most easy targets for recruitment in terrorist groups. For example, since 2009, approximately 8,000 children have been recruited by Boko Haram in Nigeria with increasing child recruitment by Al-Shabaab in Kenya, Movement of Unity and Jihad in West Africa and Abu Sayyaf Group in Philippines. Children who are recruited by terrorist groups have often acted as spies and brainwashed to being human shields and to detonate bombs.

Regarding extremism, while world leaders have preached for increased aid and educational assistance to counter terrorism, the connections between education, poverty, and terrorism are indirect and complex. Studies on the relationship between extremism and education do not show a strong consensus on the matter. Azam and Thelen (2008) conclude that "the level of foreign aid received reduces the supply of terrorist attacks by recipient countries, as does the recipient country's level of education". Bhathia and Ghanem (2017) found that *education combined with a*

[2] Youth that are considered NEETs does not necessarily mean that they are unemployable, it's possible that the individual could be actively seeking work and be properly skilled already, in transition between jobs, or taking care of elderly family.
[3] IYF, "A Future Youth Want 2017 Annual Report," *IYF*, 2017, https://iyfnet.org/annual-report/2017/.
[4] World Economic Forum (WEF), "The Future of Jobs and Skills in the Middle East and North Africa," *WEF*, May 2017, http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_EGW_FOJ_MENA.pdf.
[5] https://theconversation.com/young-people-in-the-middle-east-struggle-to-see-a-promising-future-179927
[6] Henrik Urdal, "A Clash of Generations? Youth Bulges and Political Violence," *United Nations*, July 22, 2011, http://www.un.org/esa/population/meetings/egm-adolescents/p10_urdal.pdf; Christopher Cramer, "Unemployment and Participation in Violence," *The World Bank Group*, November 16, 2010, http://web.worldbank.org/archive/website01306/web/pdf/wdr%20background%20paper%20-%20cramer.pdf.
[7] Henrik Urdal, "A Clash of Generations,"; Federal Republic of Nigeria, "National Policy on Labour Migration 2014," *International Organization for Migration (IOM)*, 2015, http://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/national_policy_labour_migration.pdf.

lack of opportunities caused by economic or external factors could lead to increased interest in terrorist activity. On the other hand, a study by Pisoiu and Hain's Theories of Terrorism shows that well-educated individuals disproportionately participate in terrorist activity if they believe that they will assume leadership roles within the organization, or if they identify strongly with the organization's goals than less educated individuals. Those that commit terrorist acts or join terrorist organization belong to wealth and education categories at or above their country's poverty and education standards. Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Maleckova's use of the case study focused on Lebanon's Hezbollah organization found that "education is positively related with the likelihood that one becomes a Hezbollah fighter."

Education as an Enabler of Social Inclusion

There are several indicators that highlight the way in which a lack of education can directly or indirectly lead to conflict. While perhaps the most commonly cited link, the relationship between education and economic prosperity is matched in importance to the links between education, social inclusion, and national identity. Educational inequality across subgroups – both ethnic and religious – within a specific nation is a strong indicator of increased internal conflict. Countries with high levels of horizontal inequities relating to mean years of schooling are substantially more likely to experience violent conflict. Unequal access to education at the subnational level can serve as a proxy for political and economic disempowerment. Within this argument, a lack of education can lead to imbalances in the very social fabric of a state and reinforces regressed group alliances. Evidence also suggests that lower wages or less education is more likely to lead a person to commit property crimes.

Educational inequality disproportionately affects women who face poor learning outcomes and lack access to quality schooling. Approximately 32 million girls of primary school age and 97 million girls of secondary school age around the world are out of school. In countries impacted by fragility, conflict, and violence, girls are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys of the same age and are 90 percent more likely to be out of school than girls the same age in non-FCV countries. Educating girls can have a considerable impact on earnings, standards of living, fertility and population growth, health, nutrition and social capital and institutions. Educating girls and promoting gender equality allows women to be active labor force participants and leads to better development outcomes. Beyond positive socioeconomic outcomes, the literature highlights that women's empowerment and gender equality are also associated with peace and stability in society.[8]

The pioneering 2018 UN and World Bank report, "Pathways to Peace, Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict," highlights that women's status relative to men's is a significant predictor of a country's propensity for violent conflict overall. The study explicitly linked gender equality and women's participation in society with a country's ability to make peace. Countries with only 10 percent of women participating in the labor force are 30 times more likely to

[8] https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/publication/why-women-inclusive-security-and-peaceful-societies/#:~:text=Beyond%20their%20roles%20as%20intermediaries,divides%20cracked%20open%20by%20conflict.

undergo internal conflict than countries with 40 percent of women participating in the labor force. Moreover, the study found that that when women's organizations participate in peace negotiations, there is a higher likelihood for a peaceful settlement. Some of the policies that can foster inclusiveness and reduce the risk of violent conflict, that are highlighted in the study, include focused investments in a marginalized region, engaging youth in meaningful activities, investing in the education of women, and setting up grievance-redress mechanisms.

Conclusion

In a time of rapid social, technological and economic change, investing in human capital and in particular in education is important for building resilience of countries. Education enhances the resilience at the individual, household, community, and national level. As the OECD highlights, "*investments in human capital can be a source of resilience over the long term and help ensure the well-being of future societies, especially in countries with large youth populations*." Thus, education is pivotal in times of uncertainty where skills and knowledge can drive recovery and innovation and steer society towards a path of development, peace and security.

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