



SELF-DETERMINATION, ENGAGEMENT, AND YOUNG ENERGY IN A FRAGILE ENVIRONMENT

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN NORTHEAST KENYA



Introduction

The North Eastern Province of Kenya is known for low rates of employment and high illiteracy when compared to the rest of the country, and its young people are considered an at-risk population. Additionally, Al Shabaab has a history of youth recruitment in this region.

The aim of the Garissa Youth (G-Youth) Project and the Yes Youth Can! North Eastern Region (YYC!) project was to engage youth in career development, livelihoods, and civic participation activities while empowering them to design and lead initiatives to improve their economic opportunities.

EDC's work in this region included three phases, which when combined, impacted 24,000 youth in the counties of Garissa, Wajir and Mandera.

Phases 1 and 2: The G-Youth Project

October 2008–October 2010

The G-Youth Project aimed to empower Garissa town youth to make sound career and life decisions as they transitioned from high school to the next phase of their lives. The project engaged youth in Garissa town in career development, livelihood, and civic participation activities through four components:

1. Establishment of a career resource center
2. Strengthening of the North East Provincial Technical Training Institute (NEP TTI)
3. Development and implementation of the Workforce Readiness Program
4. Organization of the Youth Action Summit



November 2010 –January 2013

To create enabling environments that empowered youth to design and lead initiatives to improve economic opportunities for themselves and their communities, EDC used a youth-centered framework with the following four program components:

1. Youth Action
2. Youth Work
3. Youth Education
4. Youth Civics

Phase 3: Yes Youth Can!

January 2013–January 2016

The G-Youth project joined the national YYC! Program, which was specifically focused on youth civic engagement. The program expanded to include Wajir and Mandera Counties and the whole of Garissa county.

The project mobilized youth to organize groups or bungenes (Kiswahili for parliament). These youth bungenes held elections to vote for leaders, who in turn formed a County Board Forum (CBF) in each of the three counties. Each CBF developed work plans to implement activities for local youth and carried out community projects such as:

- Setting up sports tournaments
- Helping youth get IDs
- Managing scholarships
- Providing trainings on small businesses and peace issues
- Relaying social and health information

Summary of Achievements

The G-Youth and Yes Youth Can! projects brought notable benefits to individual participants and also had a significant impact in empowering youth, building better connections between youth and their communities, and addressing issues of peace and security. Specifically:

- Over 24,000 youth across Kenya's Northeastern Region (NER) mobilized into bungenes.
- Of these, more than 6,500 served in a leadership position in their bunge.
- More than 1.3 million youth were reached with civic education radio programming over 5 years.
- Nearly 2,000 scholarships were provided to youth for further study.
- A network of Sharia-compliant Savings and Credit Cooperative Organizations (SACCOs) were established in all three NER counties (Garissa, Wajir and Mandera).

Both qualitative and quantitative assessments document considerable progress in achievement of the program's aims. While fulfillment of the larger goals of promoting peace and prosperity is difficult to quantify, it is clear from the project's qualitative study that this goal and the objectives supporting it were addressed, and youth judged it to be successful.

Key Lessons Learned

As it seems likely that future programs – especially, but not only in conflict-susceptible regions – will stress youth engagement, we cite a handful of recommendations from our experience in Northeast Kenya:

1. Involve the community from the beginning.

While this may seem an obvious notion, it is remarkable how few programs adopt this approach fully. The experience in Northeast Kenya offered a good laboratory for this idea, as it was a fairly untouched region -- youth programs like G-Youth and Yes Youth Can! did not previously exist at anything like this scale in the region. EDC deliberately built in mechanisms to engage the community, religious leaders, elders, government officials, and business leaders from the beginning. In the (earlier) G-Youth phases, this involvement was formalized in a Project Advisory Committee and Private Sector Advisory Committee. During the YYC! phase,

stakeholders' fora and village meetings with community leaders, chiefs and religious leaders built a foundation of trust by allowing the project team to discuss the project's goals and activities each time the project expanded to a new location.

2. Involve youth in meaningful ways and set realistic expectations. Again from the beginning, youth were engaged in the program's activities and direction. The initial assessment team included youth assessors and a number of focus groups with young people, which guided program design. Then, as the program actually began, civic engagement activities formalized youth leadership roles by including young people to help plan and lead events and activities. This in turn grew into youth-led groups and organizations with well-defined organizational missions, organizational structures and processes, and financial responsibilities. Expectations set for young people leading organizations must be realistic – many have limited education and often have not worked; they will also require organized capacity building on the nuts and bolts of financial and organizational management. While both time and distance are limiting factors, establishing high expectations and holding young people accountable to deadlines and quality work nonetheless yielded impressive results.

3. Scholarships are needed and greatly appreciated. Scholarships were not intended to be the hallmark of the program, but they are often cited by the community and youth as one of the best interventions. The initial assessment flagged scholarships as a need, and scholarships were in great demand by young people. It took two iterations of the scholarship program for EDC to refine the process. One factor that made scholarships successful was that the process was perceived by youth and community alike as fair and transparent. In the YYC! phase, the revised scholarship guide outlined a process where qualified applicants were selected by lottery in order to ensure fairness.

In retrospect, the program could have increased the scholarship numbers, but quantity was always tempered by budget realities.

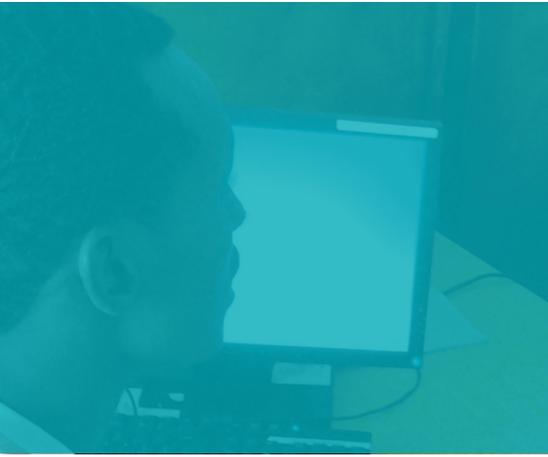
4. Including opportunities for livelihoods development strengthens participation and outcomes.

G-Youth began with an emphasis on employment through a career resource center, career counseling, work readiness and entrepreneurship training and support to NEP TTI, a local vocational institute. This led to the establishment of Savings and Credit Cooperative Organizations (SACCOs) regulated by the Kenyan government provided youth with start-up grants for aspiring entrepreneurs in the last phase of the project. EDC conducted extensive research on formation of Sharia-compliant SACCOs so that the community would be supportive of the activity which funded youth in their small businesses, such as farming or running shops.

5. Structured opportunities are key in areas plagued by radicalization and recruitment.

Simply “keeping young people busy” – a frequently heard plan – does not suffice, and purposeful, organized activities to engage youth are required. EDC's qualitative study confirmed that the project was effective in providing positive alternatives to joining groups like Al Shabaab. Youth were given avenues to make their voices heard, improve their communities and earn a living. In fact, issues of radicalization were openly discussed. Qualitative studies late in the program confirmed that youth unity was developed, even in communities where radicalization was a persistent threat. Being part of bungenes led to enhanced social interaction among youth. Youth were able to network with each other, to learn teamwork and discuss ideas to implement activities that addressed their needs, to do some small businesses together and to generally bond with each other. Being part of the bungenes had a self-reported impact on individual youth self-development, self-reliance, self-confidence and self-esteem.





6. Operating in an insecure environment often requires organizational and programmatic flexibility. During the years of implementation, the region faced numerous terrorist attacks, the most significant being the Garissa University College attack, and periods of intense clan tensions. This caused the government to impose limits on the size of groups that could gather, to initiate curfews, and to require armed security escorts in some areas. EDC used a variety of tactics to adapt to the changing environment including postponing project activities until the situation stabilized and altering activities such as taking a more localized and decentralized approach through the youth bungenes at the sub-district and village level (For example, the youth-led village bungenes had their own activities and work plans separate from the county-level work).

7. Encourage gender inclusion through the project design. Cultural reservations about the role and involvement of women are powerful concerns in many regions. The Garissa Youth/Yes Youth Can program encountered these of course, but learned that careful planning and management could support a commitment to genuine and active participation. The project maintained high standards for involvement of young women, whether in the work readiness program or recruitment into the bungenes. Young women were actively involved in dialogue and leadership positions in the program and respected by their peers, and once-determined resistance was gradually overcome in most aspects of local communities.

Youth Leaders Making a Difference

Asha Hassan, from the G-Youth and YYC! Projects was honored by the US State Department on April 20, 2016 along with other young leaders from around the world for their work in innovative initiatives. Ms. Hassan, an ethnic Somali, has developed youth-led groups spearheading dialogue and reconciliation among ethnic clans in her home region of Kenya.

“We have to love each other and we have to be together to share the ideas,” she said. “We have to respect each other’s religion.” Ms. Hassan teaches children the value of life and warns them of the dangers of joining extremist groups and being used to cause conflict in a community.



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