

Fast Track to Where?

If mitigating conflict and displacement is the aim, does convergence around universal primary education miss the mark?

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APPROXIMATELY 35 PERCENT OF THE WORLD'S 14 million refugees are young people between the ages of 12 and 24. While everyone may be vulnerable to instability, a person's odds of being displaced at some point in his or her lifetime increase greatly if s/he is young and from a developing country. The chances climb even higher if she is female and living in sub-Saharan Africa. If her country also happens to have a young population and is prone to cycles of conflict and instability, displacement during her lifetime is almost certain.

But what is actually known about the relationship between youth and instability? While there is no proven causal link between the two, their correlation is well-recognized. According to Country Indicators for Foreign Policy's *2007 Failed States Index*, more than half of countries with very young populations are ranked as critical or in danger of failing. Indeed, 12 of the 15 countries with the largest youth bulge have been home to either brutal conflict or large displaced populations, or both, in the past 10 to 15 years. This group includes Angola, Burundi, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, Yemen and Zimbabwe.

However, there are also examples of countries with very young populations (e.g. Namibia) that have avoided instability and conflict. How? Namibia's Education For All (EFA) National Plan of Action 2002–2015 may partly contain the answer. For one thing, a key strategy in the Plan is to "ensure that all children and out-of-school youth have equal access to education." Why is this important? Access to education and economic opportunity for youth is widely acknowledged as a key factor in conflict and fragility; yet youth get short shrift among most governments and education financiers.

Two recent studies (Curtain 2006; Novelli & Cardoso 2008) highlight the major gap between the expectations and aspirations of young people in countries marked by poverty, conflict and instability and the opportunities actually open to them. This gap can leave youth socially and economically desperate, which results in various forms of violence and high-risk behavior that fuel cycles of instability. In other words, the combination of a large youth bulge and an *absence of oppor-*



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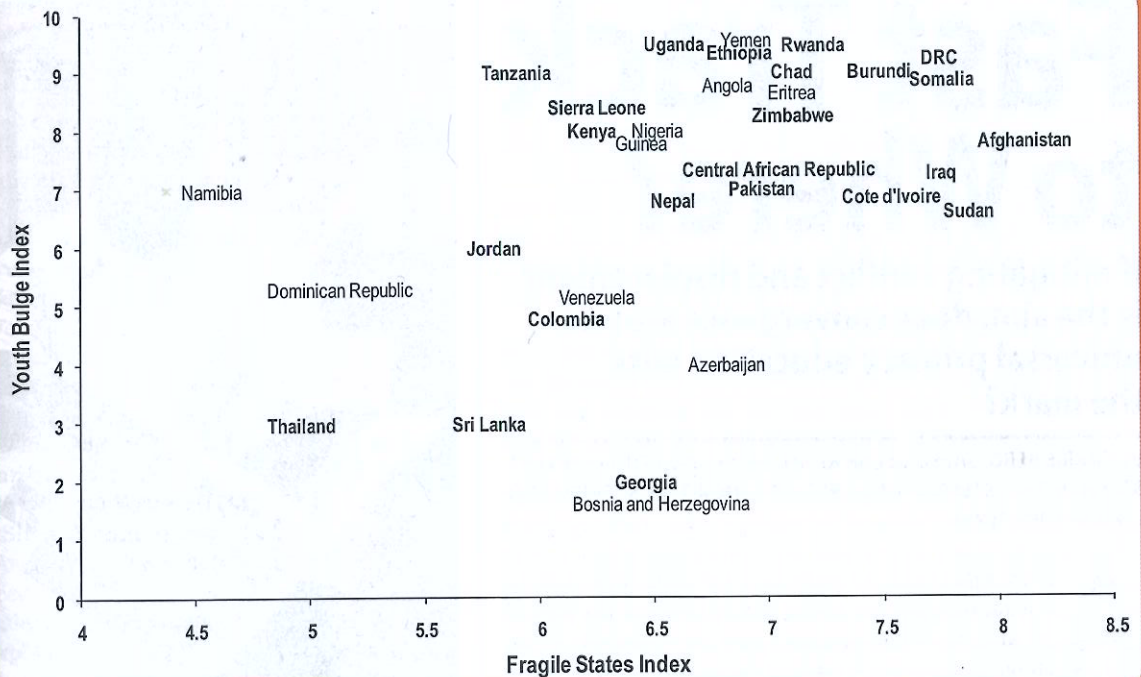
tunity are primary drivers of destabilization.

Roughly 50 percent of all aid for education over the last decade has been directed at basic education, and since then great strides have been made in meeting enrollment targets for children of primary school age. Key donors such as the World Bank, UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and UNICEF (the UN Children's Fund) have converged around the goal of universal primary education (UPE) through mechanisms like EFA's "Fast Track Initiative" (a process set up by the World Bank to provide quick and incremental support to countries not on track to attain UPE by 2015).

Broad-based support for UPE has had clear benefits, but the overwhelming convergence on UPE is causing unsustainable pressure on access to post-primary education options. With few opportunities to continue their schooling, many youth are ill-prepared to compete for decent work in already saturated job markets and are being pushed into the labor force prematurely, often in illegal and exploitive conditions. Worse still is the alarming share of 'idle youth'—young people who are neither in education nor employment (more than one quarter of all youth in sub-Saharan Africa)—further exacerbating social, economic and political problems. Unless we change course, this is what the future holds for an entire ▶

Youth and Instability

Country Indicators for Foreign Policy, Failed & Fragile States, 2007
 For a detailed description of the CFP "Failed States" model, see <http://www.carleton.ca/cifp/ffs.htm>



generation of primary schoolchildren when the educational paths they are pursuing come to an end.

The 2009 EFA Global Monitoring Report notes that many governments have paid insufficient attention to the learning needs of youth and adults, but the report dedicates less than two pages to this topic in the 463-page document. Duty bearers must be sensitized to the urgency of addressing the increased demand for educational and economic opportunity among youth resulting from achieving EFA, especially in countries that have the undesirable combination of a large youth bulge and lack of opportunity (i.e., prone to instability).

In addition to the unintended consequences of EFA on youth opportunities, a second trend of concern to youth (particularly youth living in areas of instability) is the increased funding for education in emergencies, which typically supports education for children under 18 through creation of safe learning spaces, teacher training in child-centered methodologies and providing psychosocial support for children. These initiatives are clearly beneficial for children in the short term; however, they can raise false hopes for continued educational support when emergencies end or that the basic education received will result in improved employability or earnings, when often this is not the case.

While post-primary options are costlier and more complex to implement than primary education (especially in emergency settings), absence of relevant education options for youth in such situations can leave youth socially and economically marginalized, and countries more prone to instability. To address this gap, donors, governments, policymakers, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) all have a role to play.

Donors and policymakers must better align their policy priorities with appropriate humanitarian and devel-

opment initiatives. Where disaster risk reduction, education in emergencies and conflict mitigation are the policy aims, the solutions must focus on the critical nexus between youth, instability and opportunity. To maximize the potential for success, meaningful opportunities for youth must be a central pillar of such initiatives.

NGOs and the private sector must build alliances to improve not only the supply of relevant education opportunities for youth, but also the demand for an educated and skilled labor force. Public/private alliances will be essential to building an infrastructure for post-primary education that meets both the increased demand for services among youth and the needs of the private sector. NGOs should stop implementing piecemeal education programs for youth that cannot be taken to sufficient scale, and instead invest their efforts (jointly with the private sector) in systemic improvements of the educational infrastructure—vocational and secondary school construction, market driven curriculum development, post-primary teacher training, training to work linkages and last, but not least, capacity building of humanitarian and development actors to meet the specific educational and economic needs of youth.

Governments (especially those with large youth cohorts and a dearth of educational opportunities) must ensure education is accessible and relevant to youth and to the economic development needs of their countries. As in the case of Namibia, governments must critically assess the needs of the youth demographic within their borders and ensure that national curricula, policies, programs and action plans are designed to fulfill the needs and harness the capabilities of youth. In particular, youth need to be equipped with knowledge, skills, attitudes and *opportunities* that will allow them to contribute to the stability and development of their countries. **MD**