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**Sustaining peace through youth empowerment?  
“The case of young men’s violence in Hargeisa”**

**High-quality Research Support programme (HQRS)**

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## **Introduction**

Somaliland is a country with a significant youth population, which increases in size year on year, and it is the youth who have the biggest burden of the socio-economic problems that exist within Somaliland. These social challenges may well contribute to the violence and social turmoil. Violence committed by young men, in particular, is a significant public problem that Hargeisa residents encounter on a daily basis. Young people in Hargeisa are both victims and perpetrators of physical assault-related injuries. These behaviors may result in mental health problems, high-risk sexual behavior, rapes, hopelessness and school dropout amongst the youth population.

In response to the violence committed by young men in Hargeisa, youth group organizers began working to address the issue of youth violence and delivered a program for the last four years through an integrated approach to tackle youth issues. These youth programs intended to convince youth and young adults not to engage in risky, criminal, or negative behaviors, including gang membership. With an overall objective of reducing the number of young people participating in violence, these programs aim to encourage leadership, to train them in employment readiness and to provide them with communication skills through a variety of strategies designed to redirect and support positive behavior whilst preventing risky behaviors.

The main purpose of this paper is to address the major problems that can affect the sustainability of peace in Somaliland and how youth contributes to those problems. In so doing, this paper will categorize the major aspects that young people contribute to sustainable peace and state building particularly in Hargeisa. This paper will also investigate the extent to which youth violence prevention programs and policies that are planned and comprehensive. Moreover, this paper will assess the major problems faced by youth in Hargeisa by the prioritizing into themes of roles that youth empowering actors can play in addressing these issues and raising them at the national level. Moreover, this paper will investigate the underlying social, political and economic risk factors for behaviors that could orchestrate violence among the youth and how these risks could be addressed.

## **Overall aim and specific objectives**

The main purpose of this paper is to address the major problems that can affect the sustainability of Somaliland's peace and how young people contribute to these problems, and to categorize the major sectors in which youth can contribute to sustainable peace and state building in Hargeisa. Within this, the specific objectives of this paper are to investigate whether there is a planned and comprehensive framework of policies and programs that tackle youth violence, and to assess the major challenges faced by young people in Hargeisa and prioritizing these into key themes. Moreover, this paper will investigate the underlying social, political and economic risk factors or behaviors that could orchestrate violence among the youth and how they could be addressed.

## **Research methods**

This study will be conducted using a descriptive research design utilizing qualitative methodology, which constitutes the best method of addressing this topic given the nature of the research problem, the research objectives stemming from that problem, and the types of research questions therefore addressed. Data will be sourced both from secondary and primary sources. Secondary data will be collected from sources such as books, the Internet, and policy reports, which will be reviewed as supporting evidence.

The main sources of primary data will be young people living in Hargeisa, civil servants from the Ministry of Youth and Sport and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, other government officials, representatives of youth organizations, police officers, and academics. The primary data will be gathered directly from respondents using semi-structured interviews and semi-ethnographic observations.

## **Literature**

### **Defining Youth & Youth Violence**

Given the problematic nature of defining ‘youth’, some argue that it is a coherent group whereas others think youth is ‘socially constructed’ and that there is less of a connection between people owing to ‘age than with status and behavior’ (UNDP, 2006: 12). In this study ‘youth’ is defined as young people between the ages of 15 and 30 years old as the survey carried out in this study targeted members of the population within this age range and assessed how youth organizations assisted them to exit the cycle of violence. However, 14 to 35 years of age is the range used to describe a young person in Somaliland as outlined within the National Youth Policy of Somaliland (Somaliland National Youth Policy, 2010: 12).

Youth violence is defined as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, exerted by or against children, adolescents or young adults, ages 10-29, which results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development, or deprivation”. (World Health Organization (WHO)) This description is particularly effective for use within this survey report as it highlights both the physical and emotional impacts of violence on young people in Hargeisa.

### **Factors which may lead to youth violence**

As mentioned above in the Somaliland National Youth Policy, Somaliland’s youth population represents the majority of the general public. However, within the context of youth population statistics in Sub-Saharan Africa these proportions are not unusual. The continent is said to have the highest concentration of young people with these figures set to rise (AU Report, May 2011). While representing the majority, Somaliland’s youth also face the bulk of social, economic and political impacts and challenges. Below is a discussion of some of the main structural issues faced by this group.

“Structural factors are features which have become entrenched in the policies, structures and fabric of a society that may create the ideal circumstances for violence to occur, for instance; social, political or economic inequities/exclusion” (Hilker & Fraser, 2009:11). A problematic area which remains an obstacle to youth development across the African continent is poor

education and a lack of skills development. Although it is reported that 70% of youth are able to access basic education, there are some major issues faced by young people in education (Somaliland Youth Status Survey, 2010:8). The Somaliland National Youth Policy (2010:20) has rightly highlighted a number of critical factors such as “low financial investment in education, poor curriculum and teaching quality, lack of career education and counseling” amongst others. These dynamics, which are prevalent in the educational institutions, have led to numerous loopholes which have laden young people with degrees and certificates without consequentially leading to economic mobility. Furthermore, the commercialization of education by the private sector and the weak regulatory policies enacted by the Ministry of Education has arguably added to poor quality education in many institutions. This paper argues that there is a lack of a vision in preparing young people for a labor market which they are suited for and can contribute to.

There is a severe lack of opportunities for young people to build skills within educational institutions and external centers. This inevitably creates mismatch between the skills that young people possess and those required by the job market. As a result, there are often large cohorts of young graduates and school leavers who find themselves outside of the labor market despite having educational qualifications.

Unemployment or under-employment is a challenge which is affecting young people all over the globe, even in the most developed economies. With the worldwide economic recessions, labor markets are excluding especially the most vulnerable groups in society. Since the extraordinary rise in youth unemployment between 2008 and 2009, the global youth unemployment rate has stabilized at a very high level. Global youth unemployment was estimated to be 73.4 million in 2013, which is an increase of 3.5 million since 2007 and 0.8 million above the 2011 level (International Labour Organization: 2013:7). Young people residing in developing regions such as Africa are especially affected by global economic recessions. Due to increased globalization and interconnectedness, the trickledown effects of these negative occurrences on domestic environments coupled with structural problems caused by a number of political and economic factors all add to the burden of challenges facing young people within their countries including Somaliland.

Vast unemployment amongst young people remains one of the biggest obstacles to youth development, and the most severe challenge for any leadership to have tackled in Somaliland. In its 25 years of existence, still with no international recognition, Somaliland has undergone many transformations and developments. However, any successes have been unevenly skewed towards the political and security front. Given the history and context, perhaps this is to be expected. As a country devastated by civil war and the resultant destruction of infrastructure and human psychologies, successive administrations in Somaliland have focused most of their efforts on the priority areas of political and social reconciliation as well as the establishment of peace and security. In all of this, young people have been largely ignored by the state. There have been dramatic advancements in the business sector and service industries such as the airlines, hotels and restaurants, money transfer companies and telecommunications. Yet, despite the fact that young people are often at the forefront of these companies, still there persists an unequal balance between the size of the youth population and the availability of jobs to young people as well as their appropriateness for the young job-seekers (Abdullah, 2013:52). Furthermore, the mismatches between the skills that young people possess and those required by the job market still linger.

### **The consequences of youth violence**

The consequences of youth violence and the burden on the social and cultural spheres and security sector in Hargeisa are significant. Additionally, youth crime is the second most prevalent factor causing physical harm to young people in Hargeisa aged 15 to 30 years old. However, the number of young men engaging in violence increases every year (Youth Violence Report, 2014). Gangs of young men in Hargeisa are far more likely than youth not involved in gangs to be both victims and perpetrators of violence, the dangers of gang membership go far beyond crime and violence. Gang-involved youth are more likely to engage in substance abuse and high-risk group sexual behavior and consequentially to experience a wide range of potentially long-term health and social consequences, which in turn also adversely affect their local communities in Hargeisa. Moreover, most of the violence committed by young people in Hargeisa resulted from those affected by dropping out of school, teen parenthood, family problems and unstable employment. Currently, Hargeisa communities address the aftermath of violence committed by young men, because the vast majority of young people who join a gang

commit violence do so at a very early age (between the ages of 13 and 15) (Youth Violence Report, 2014). Having said this, many early-prevention policies and programs are effective and provide young people in Hargeisa with avenues out of the cycle of violence, leading to positive outcomes, including educational attainment and reduced abuse and neglect.

## **Findings and Analysis**

### ***Youth violence prevention programs***

The respondents were asked about what kind of youth prevention programs their organization implements. The vast majority of the respondents stated that they provided skills training (particularly vocational skills), while the other respondents also provided the implementation of cross cutting programs such as civic education, advocacy and awareness rising.

### ***Programs impacting on young people's attitudes toward and perceptions of violence***

Most of the institutions and organizations addressing youth issues agreed that their programs and policies have an impact on young people's attitudes toward and perceptions of violence. Some stated that their organizational programs have an impact on youth and engage intensively with effective and fruitful programs for reducing violence. For example, some of the respondents indicated that when violent and offensive young people are enrolled to their programs and attain skills and knowledge, they graduate with a different attitude, calm and transformed.

### ***Organizational priorities: the approaches to tackling youth violence***

Most of the respondents indicated that their programs focus on influencing policies that are concerned with youth matters and that they conduct program interventions that are designed to change young people's attitudes:

Ministry of Justice is policies oriented to influence concerning agencies, because in 2015 the Ministry drafted youth policies framework such as Diversion Policies and Parole polices which all concerning the rehabilitation and reintegration of youth offenders.

(Anonymous interviewee)

Moreover, some of the respondents mentioned that they offer peer-to-peer activities, awareness and capacity building interventions in addition to policy advocacy.

### ***Prevention of violence committed by young men in Hargeisa***

In response to a question asking for the best methods through which to prevent violence committed by young people, the majority of the respondents proposed strengthening civic studies in primary education, forming national job creation policy, establishing juvenile tribunals/courts, developing legal policies and legislation, and creating youth platforms, youth recreational sport and education centers. One of the respondents added that capacity building of youth should include leadership training, and awareness training on gender based violence, reproductive health rights, as well as other programs applicable to young people's social issues. Additionally, the majority of the respondents mentioned that the government, particularly the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and other concerned public agencies, should take the primary responsibility for tackling youth violence. Furthermore, civil society organizations, parents, community committees and private sector were highlighted as groups that should work with the government to achieve success of preventing violence.

### ***The major physical violence youth men commit***

The majority of the respondents mentioned that the physical violence committed by young people are rape, theft, robbery, affray and club fighting. The respondents added that the reason youth commit this is mainly due to lack of professional knowledge, ethical values, and also for economic reasons.

Always they commit affray or club fight when they play football, because they didn't know the professional ethics of football. They commit theft and robbery to pay fees of their clubs, because these youth are most of them from low income families.

(Anonymous interviewee)

The interviewees also claimed that young men commit rape since once they are of reproductive age and where they lack professional and cultural ethics.

## **Conclusion**

The capital city of Somaliland, Hargeisa, has a significant youth population. In recent years communities have been suffering from unlawful acts of violence committed by young men. These young men of school age violent groups organize themselves in village groups usually at night while other peaceful groups are also organized, for example, as sport teams. These young men in the latter groups are often victims of physical assault-related injuries. These may result in conflict and insecurity in Hargeisa. In response to these issues, youth organizers, such as representatives of youth organizations and related government departments are working to deal with the issue of youth violence. To this end they have delivered an integrated approach of programs and advocacy intended to bring youth and young adults out of the cycle of violence.

This study intended to understand the effectiveness of these policies and programs, and the findings of this study have indicated that youth prevention strategies mainly focus on skills training, particularly vocational skills, and the implementation of cross cutting programs such as civic education, advocacy and awareness raising. The respondents mentioned that their programs and policies have impacted on youth attitudes toward and perception of violence. Moreover, the respondents have stated that their policies and programs focus on influencing the issues that are most concerned with youth interventions and that are designed to change young people's attitudes toward and perceptions of violence. The main crimes that young people have committed are rape, theft, robbery, affray and club fighting, and the study finds that a combination of social exclusion and economic issues are the major causes of these types of youth violence in Hargeisa. Finally, this study finds that youth unemployment and peer pressure are the main factors that cause young people to commit violence. As a result, future research on this issue should be targeted to identify the main causes of youth unemployment in Hargeisa.

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