



State of the Field Report: Holistic, Cross-Sectoral Youth Development

This ‘State of the Field Report’ presents the latest research on holistic, cross-sectoral youth development programming. The document is based on a review of more than 46 publicly available studies and in-depth interviews with 13 key thought leaders in the field. Study authors held consultations with USAID subject matter experts and reviewed strategic documents from numerous donor organizations.

The report is intended to inform the design of future USAID youth programs, and guide USAID’s Office of Education in setting priorities for youth focused research and evaluation. USAID also sees this document as contributing to the larger evidence base around holistic, cross-sectoral youth development.

Findings

The majority of youth programs in developing countries are comprehensive in scope and emphasize skill building and connections with opportunities and supports. More specifically, they include activities such as:

- ✓ basic education;
- ✓ recreational activities;
- ✓ civic engagement;
- ✓ conflict mediation;
- ✓ health education;
- ✓ vocational training; and
- ✓ life skills training.

Findings from this research show:

- **A broad set of cognitive and social-emotional skills influence academic achievement, positive social behavior, and adjustment for youth across cultures and countries.** Although there is no single “list” of important skills may vary by context, key cognitive and social-emotional skills are literacy/numeracy,

self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-control, perseverance, decision-making skills, empathy, and positive social connections.

- **As youth get older, technical, vocational, health, and “life skills” also become important for facilitating the transition to adulthood.** While there are varying definitions of life skills, almost all holistic interventions offered to youth include this component.



“Every local NGO and international NGO that I am in contact with is coming to the same conclusion—that you have to engage young people holistically around a comprehensive set of outcomes. Everybody is trying to move in that direction.”

~Study key informant

- **Indications are that these cognitive, social-emotional, and technical skills predict overarching, sector-based outcomes for adults including labor-market outcomes (employment, earnings, etc.), family life, conflict resolution, civic engagement, and health behaviors.** More research is needed on what the most valuable skills outcomes are for youth in developing countries.
- **Skills and outcomes for youth can be improved through a range of different programs and practices including school-based curricula, out-of-school training, and engagement with youth organizations.** Unfortunately it is difficult to identify what components work to achieve what outcomes with the current evidence. While some programs have consistently produced positive results across multiple evaluations, there is no single program or combination of activities that works for all youth. Continuing to build the evidence will shed more light on what kinds of programs are most successful for youth in developing countries.

Gap Areas In The Research

There are several key areas that require further investment and research, including the need to:

1. **Develop an integrated positive youth development framework to guide international positive youth development efforts.** Such a framework could list specific skills and behaviors that are needed for youth to be productive, connected, and able to navigate social settings. This framework should include the most universally relevant skills for success such as self-regulation and self-efficacy, but also be broad enough to allow for country-level modifications.
2. **Develop or compile a set of psychometrically sound, culturally adaptable assessments to measure key skills and behaviors that can be used across countries and projects.** There are numerous tools available that measure a variety of youth skills, behaviors, and attitudes. However, very few have been used in developing country environments. Common measures used across programs would make it easier to compare effectiveness.

3. **Support rigorous mixed methods research for programs that are used widely and have some evidence of promise.** Most of the evaluations reported are performance evaluations or quasi-experimental designs that limit what can be learned. International donors are moving toward more rigorous experimental research designs, including randomized controlled trials. Using both qualitative and quantitative techniques during evaluations is recommended in order to understand not only “what” might have been successful, but also “why.”
4. **Investigate what the most important skills are for youth in developing countries that serve as milestones to longer-term success.** More is known about foundational skills youth need to acquire in the United States in order to realize positive outcomes later in life. In the developing country context, certain assets, characteristics, or skills could be of high importance to positive long-term outcomes. Effort should be made to clearly identify priority skills and to test their long-term impact.
5. **Evaluate innovative models for engaging youth and increasing youth participation.** While including youth in program design, implementation, and evaluation is widely regarded among practitioners as a “best practice,” little is known about the impact youth engagement has on the success of a project (and sectoral impacts). More research can be done to discover what youth participation strategies work and whether these activities lead to better outcomes in the long term.
6. **Develop and evaluate innovative models of cross-sectoral collaboration.** Although there is growing support for cross-sectoral collaboration in the field of youth development, there is relatively little guidance as to how to best accomplish collaboration or reduce barriers to collaboration among service providers and funders. More needs to be known about the benefits and challenges of cross-sectoral programming.

Next Steps

Through its efforts to develop a youth-focused research and evaluation agenda, USAID is advancing the evidence base on holistic, cross-sectoral youth development. We are committed to taking the issues addressed in this report to the next stage of development.