We Want You! Youth Recruitment in Post-Conflict Areas

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According to the latest United Nations estimates of the world's population (as of 2020), 1.2 billion of the planet's inhabitants were between 15 and 24 years of age. This represents 1 in 6 people. By 2030, this number is projected to grow around 7 percent, amounting to 1.3 billion youths. The majority of this growth will occur in developing countries, and these youths in particular are in need.

POST-CONFLICT INSECURITIES

A broad variety of insecurities came to the fore in the research conducted for the ICT4COP project - Some of them unique to their specific context, some of them common to the region. More often than one might expect from places so far apart, these countries shared the same underlying macro-level problems. Our research in case countries near the Horn of Africa, South Asia, Central America and South-East Europe (see figure 1) all pointed out struggles with widespread poverty, unemployment, corruption, nepotism, inequality and discrimination, albeit in different forms. The impact of these macro-level problems is felt by all affected in these countries, but not necessarily in the same way. What Hills writes about her research in Somalia[1], seems to be universal for the results from all regions:

> *"Insecurity is Mogadishu's great leveller; it affects men, women, children, youths and minorities, albeit differently."*

For youth, the macro-level insecurities often mean a complete lack of perspective for their future. Youth unemployment is skyrocketing – in the Balkans especially, where Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo take the lead with reported youth unemployment averaging around 54% between 2012 and 2019 according to the World Bank data. This gives way to poverty and an increased focus on emigrating to a place with more opportunities[2].

> *"To many, the ultimate resolution mechanism is emigration [...]."*

Figure 1: Regions studied in the ICT4COP Project.

The notion of "getting out" is shared by many youth across the regions in the ICT4COP project. However, getting into 'the land of opportunity' like the US or EU member states is extremely difficult for many youth living in post-conflict areas, and in no way addresses the problems in their home countries. Nevertheless, it makes youth vulnerable, especially to recruitment into criminal groups in some countries. This brief will give an insight into the ICT-4COP findings on youth recruitment into gangs and (foreign) radicalized groups below.

RADICALIZATION
Examples from South-East European, African and South Asian Regions.

Many factors play a part in the radicalization process of youth in post-conflict countries. Although the previously addressed socioeconomic insecurities are usually not the sole (or main) reason for youth involvement in radicalized groups, they can be an important ingredient for the toxic mix that makes youth vulnerable for recruitment.

As is the case in Kosovo, for example:

"Simply put, the country has many young men in poor socioeconomic conditions not engaged in organized activities."[3]

The fieldwork on youth in the ICT4COP project has touched upon some characteristics that are part of the toxic mix for youth radicalization. We highlight some examples from South-East Europe, Africa and South Asia.

SOUTH EAST EUROPE

Kosovo has among the highest rates of 'foreign fighters', where individuals travel abroad to fight in conflicts. Over 300 individuals have travelled to IS-dominated area. Potential explanations for the alarming trend of youth radicalization range from online (Albanian) propaganda to the poor socioeconomic status, inactivity, and a "hope for a better life". Moreover, the new 'Kosovar identity' has not settled well (yet?), which can be particularly difficult for youth.

Our researchers studying South-East Europe found that "police presence in schools is increasingly introduced to address crime issues and antisocial behaviour but is often widened to identifying and referring information on students who might be[come] involved in violent extremism." However, identifying radicalized students can be extremely difficult and the researchers emphasise the danger of (mis)labelling Muslim families as risk factors and making them vulnerable to segregation and discrimination[2].

Moreover, the multitude of insecurities experienced by Kosovar youth, often related to the poor economic status and high levels of unemployment, remain; even after prolonged international support and interference.

AFRICA

Our researchers in the African region found that strict cultural norms can sometimes be reason for the exclusion of youth from varying societal activities and communities. Our researcher from Somalia, for example, stated that:

"Somali culture explicitly excludes youth from political participation because they are not considered mature or experienced enough to take responsibility for participating in formal meetings, let alone lead a community. [...] Youth have been marginalized by their elders and abandoned by their clans, the government and society at large."[4]

This can not only be destructive to youth's participation in mainstream society, but is more specifically linked to an increased risk of radicalization. In the case of Somalia, young men between the ages of 15 and 35 can be especially vulnerable to recruitment by Al-Shabaab[4] – a militant group of jihadist fundamentalists, designated as a terrorist group by some international countries. It is not a coincidence, that Al-Shabaab means 'the youth'. Most of the national and international interviewees also emphasised the alienation felt by youth in later research[6].

SOUTH ASIA

Similar to the Somali example, in Pakistan, mainly young men are the ones who join militant groups. Locals in Swat, a district near the Afghan border, argue that they are they are the excluded, neglected and deprived young men who are critical to the government and local landlords. Respondents from Pakistan argued that "social and political exclusion of the youth had played a major role in conflict causation and escalation"[7], and:

"[the] majority of the youth is marginalized and poor, so they can become easy targets to be radicalized [...]".

There is a need for more attention to the needs of youth and finding a way in which further marginalization and exclusion can be stopped. Some respondents from Pakistan expressed that, "if ignored further, they [youth] can turn the normal situation upside down."[5]

GANG VIOLENCE AND MEMBERSHIP
Examples from the Central American region

CENTRAL AMERICA

In Central America, youth are also vulnerable to recruitment into criminal groups. But here, these groups are mainly gangs, rather than extremist groups. The recruitment procedure into such gangs also seems to be quite different from the recruitment described for militia in the previous examples on marginalized youth in Pakistan and Somalia. Young males and females are not just lured into gang-membership by exploiting their vulnerability and lack of perspective: they are sometimes forced.[5]

In an attempt to stop the widespread gang presence in the Central American region, a so-called "war on gangs" started that gave rise to raids aimed to locate and arrest young people:

"The police had the power to detain, arrest and imprison (if only temporarily) those who look like gang members. About 95% of those arrested were released for lack of merit or judicial misuse of the law."

This obviously damaged youth relations with the rule of law. Young men and women from El Salvador stated that "they feel insecure everywhere and pressured by both the gangs that control the neighbourhood where they live and the police that patrols it." [6]. The effects of the widened gap between youth and police is also painfully clear when it comes to community-oriented policing efforts: interaction with police carries the risk of being labelled as a 'police informer', thus being an enemy to the gangs. Any outreach initiated by community police can put the community members who collaborate or even merely attend a meeting at great risk[6].

The importance of tackling the underlying macro-level problems of a developing, post-conflict country is essential to have a chance at winning the 'war on gangs', as our researchers emphasise:

"There are different sources of insecurity for youth both in public and private spheres, in the street by the gangs and the police; at home and in school by their family or peers. These forms of insecurity are not taken into account in the 'war against gangs,' making it extremely short sighted to transform any social reality." [6]

CONCLUSION

Research in the ICT4COP project has shown the insecurities of youth across many different post-conflict contexts. There are broad socioeconomic issues that underlie many of the insecurities experienced by youth in post-conflict areas. Youth is sometimes marginalized to such an extent, that they feel alienated and excluded from society altogether.

While there are significant differences between the post-conflict contexts, youth seem to share a dream of "getting out" due to the multitude of insecurities in their home countries. It makes youth vulnerable to recruitment into criminal groups. In Africa, South-Asia and South-East Europe, ICT4COP researchers showed that extremist groups are a key problem. In Central America, gangs pose the main risk for youth recruitment.

All in all, youth in post-conflict areas are vulnerable to recruitment into gangs and extremist groups due to a 'toxic mix' of insecurities ranging from a poor socioeconomic status and a focus on "getting out" to an identity crisis and exclusion/alienation from society. Therefore, each post-conflict context needs a thorough understanding of the insecurities that youth experience in order to implement meaningful policies to enhance human security. It should address the human in 'human security'.

Notes
1. WP7 Africa (2019). Matrix 4 Africa: D 7.8. May 2019. ICT4COP internal reporting.
2. WP10 South-East Europe. (2019). Matrix 4 South-East Europe. ICT4COP internal reporting.
3. Knudsen, R. A. (2017). Radicalization and foreign fighters in the Kosovo context: An analysis of international media coverage of the phenomena. NUPI Working Paper.
4. WP7 Africa. (2017). Matrix 2 Africa: D 7.6 May 2017. ICT4COP internal reporting.
5. WP8 South Asia. (2019). Matrix 4 South Asia: D 8.6 May 2019. ICT4COP internal reporting.
6. WP9 Central America. (2019). Matrix 4 Central America: D 9.9 May 2019. ICT4COP internal reporting.

Author Bio

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The Project

The ICT4COP research project seeks to understand human security in post-conflict settings by researching community-based policing and post-conflict police reform.

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