

Youth-Led Election Programming

FINDINGS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME STUDY ON CRS' JUSTICE AND PEACEBUILDING PROGRAM IMPACTS¹

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) commissioned the University of Notre Dame (UND) to study the impact of CRS' justice and peacebuilding (JPB) investments in six countries.² Among these was a project, "Promoting Peace in Northern Ghana," which featured a Young Peace Ambassador (YPA) training program. The YPA program engaged youth in mitigating elections-related violence, and increasing their civic engagement in three Catholic dioceses. UND evaluated the program during the summer of 2018. A key finding was that youth under 35 years of age felt estranged from their communities and were longing for recognition and to re-engage. Prior to the YPA project, respondents – especially females – were less likely to report having a sense of belonging or perceived stature in their communities. Because of YPA and other efforts, UND found that compared to previous years, youth

had regained their voice and that CRS's electoral messaging programs alongside the efforts of others helped to reduce elections violence in targeted areas. UND recommended that CRS continue to address structural issues around youth and elections processes, and promote greater youth voice outside of elections cycles, and within health, education and livelihoods programs.



A Young Peace Ambassador in Tamale, Northern Ghana leads a traditional dance competition organized to promote peace messages in advance of elections. [Sam Phelps for CRS]

BACKGROUND

"Promoting Peace in Northern Ghana" ran from February 2016 through September 2017 in Damongo, Navrongo-Bolgatanga, and Tamale dioceses in northern Ghana. Northern Ghana borders the southern fringe of the Sahel. Ghana's Upper East, Upper West and Northern regions are among the country's least developed, and the most prone to elections violence. To become YPAs, youth received workshop training in elections observation, monitoring and mediation. They also learned how to communicate peace messages

via radio, cultural and sporting events. In all, 90 youth – 30 from each diocese – joined the program. In addition, the project offered a one-day training to 926 young community peace volunteers to implement community-based "positive peace" activities and to use Interactive Voice Response (IVR) technology to promote peaceful elections. Local partners supported the YPA selection process by identifying, interviewing and recommending young people from their communities.

¹ **What are we Fighting For? Reflections on CRS' Justice and Peacebuilding Programs:** Task Order #1 Final Report, Notre Dame Initiative for Global Development, submitted by the Notre Dame Initiative for Global Development, reports on findings in a study, commissioned by CRS on its youth, gender and peacebuilding projects. Jaimie Bleck, Associate Professor, was the lead on the youth component. Field research was conducted during the summer of 2018.

² The countries were Bosnia Herzegovina, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Philippines, and Rwanda.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

UND investigated the following questions:

- How did CRS' interventions influence electoral violence in zones of intervention?
- How did CRS interventions to promote civic engagement in electoral processes influence zones of intervention?
- How successful was CRS in affecting YPA and their communities in:
 - Increasing trust and perceptions of trustworthiness of other citizens and out-group members;
 - Increasing participation in political and community initiatives;
 - Increasing internal efficacy; and
 - Increasing willingness to denounce electoral violence and sustain peace norms?
- Do youth beneficiaries and their networks maintain the following behaviors over time as compared to similar youth who did not participate in the program:
 - Exhibit more pro-peace/anti-violence attitudes;
 - Practice conflict prevention behaviors; and
 - Maintain higher levels of civic and political engagement over time?

"If you compare 2016 to previous years, you can see that the difference is there. People respect one another. When people see someone from another political party, they know that we are all one."
(Tamale 23, NA, Treatment)

- UND Study

METHODS

UND's evaluation was conducted during the summer of 2018 at 36 sites in the towns of Bawku, Damongo, and Tamale. Half of the sites included in the study were recipients of a YPA intervention; the others served as control sites. At each site, a catchment area was identified and 40 respondents were selected at random, ensuring a representative sampling of people over 35 and under 35 years of age, and equal numbers of women and men. Four of the respondents (two over 35 and two under 35) participated in a task force game, which measured differences in levels of trust and ways of identifying and rewarding merit. The remaining 36 respondents played a trust game and completed surveys that gauged perceptions of violence, levels of political participation, and exposure to anti-violence messaging. Researchers conducted interviews with youth, traditional and religious leaders, and with administrative authorities.

Caveats/Limitations: The selection of project sites was not random. CRS chose sites in consultation with other organizations that conducted pro-peace messaging.³ In addition, messaging from multiple sources - YPAs, disc jockeys, celebrities, religious leaders, NGOs, and the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) – could not be confined solely to target areas. The spillover or bleeding effect meant that people in the UND control groups had also been exposed to pro-peace messaging, although perhaps less intensely and less systematically.

KEY FINDINGS

EXPOSURE TO AND EFFECTS OF PEACE MESSAGING

Isolating the role of the YPA Program in towns and urban centers was difficult because messages traveled beyond neighborhoods, reaching broader audiences. However, per UND's findings, treatment areas that had exhibited high fear levels and that had received YPA interventions, demonstrated lower levels of violence, and higher electoral participation than control groups. Researchers noted that isolated rural areas permitted more precise measurement of the treatment effect.

³ "CRS explicitly sought to collaborate with other organizations and reinforce their capacity to spread peace messages," per 'CRS Promoting Peace in Northern Ghana, Final Report' (published April 2017)



This team of Young Peace Ambassadors in Bawku, Northern Ghana, were among those trained and deployed to promote sustained peace and conflict transformation in their communities before, during and in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 general elections. [Sam Phelps for CRS]

HOW DID CRS INTERVENTIONS INFLUENCE ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN ZONES OF INTERVENTION?

UND researchers wanted to know whether the YPA activity had impacted electoral violence. They found the following:

- CRS' programming was effective in generating conversations about peace. Eighty-seven percent of respondents reported discussing peace around the election and efforts to stop violence while thirty-five percent stated that they attempted to actively deter or stop an act of violence.
- Consistent with messages embedded in CRS programming, participants internalized messages from various media that linked "peace to development."
- Most interviewees noted a reduction in electoral violence in 2016, although a few respondents in some villages in Damongo diocese noted an uptick in violence versus 2012.
- Those who received the YPA messages were more likely to be involved in their religious community.
- Individuals who heard peace messaging from more than one source were more likely to attempt to halt an act of violence.

HOW DID CRS INTERVENTIONS TO PROMOTE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN ELECTORAL PROCESSES INFLUENCE ZONES OF INTERVENTION?

Regarding the impact of the project on civic engagement in electoral processes, UND researchers found:

- "Conjoint analysis" to show preferences toward violence⁴ indicated that respondents selected candidates with a harsh message toward political violence 61% of the time, candidates with a moderate message 51% of the time, and candidates with a lenient message only 39% of the time.
- A candidate's stance against violence was a stronger determinant for receiving votes than the candidate's age, gender, ethnicity, or religion.
- Youth felt empowered because of their increased access to information and social media networking.

⁴ Exposing respondents to different combinations of candidate qualities and positions enabled UND to measure the importance of demographic variables (i.e. age, ethnicity, religion, and gender) among voters compared to a candidate's messages about violence. The hypothetical candidates took lenient, moderate, or harsh positions as defined below.

Lenient: Political violence is wrong, but I cannot control the actions of my supporters.

Moderate: If any of my supporters engage in political violence, they should be removed from the party.

Harsh: If any of my supporters engage in political violence, they should be arrested.

HOW SUCCESSFUL WAS CRS IN AFFECTING YOUNG AMBASSADORS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES?

Regarding the impact of the project on YPAs and their communities, UND researchers found the following:

- YPAs implemented the action plans they designed during training: organizing sports activities, utilizing the radio, and collaborating with other religious and community groups. But, organizing events and bringing energy to campaigns were short-lived activities without lasting effect on parties. In reference to the exploitation of youth for campaigns and then failing to fulfill promises, one respondent observed, “During campaign times, the youth do well. But after the campaigns the parties turn their back on youth.”
- Training and financial backing were useful to YPAs. Also, affiliating with CRS, a non-political actor, was essential in helping YPAs deliver their pro-peace messaging.
- The work of YPAs was observed and appreciated by others. In turn, friends and acquaintances were sensitized and began promoting peace on their own.
- By successfully communicating peace messages, YPAs felt empowered and gained an audience with influential stakeholders.
- Despite being elected to their local assemblies, youth had to overcome rigid social norms that governed community and government relations. “The old hands were still in charge,” attesting to the difficulty of becoming decisionmakers.
- Compared with their older counterparts, younger task force leaders were more likely to select task force members based on reputation *and* merit. UND recommended that to overcome vulnerability to pressure and cooptation by local VIPs, youth “seek out someone whose qualities or skills best map onto the task, which would be more efficient for community development.”

*“Yeah I hear it. I hear it in the radio, the television. They were advising that this year vote, we should know how to humble ourselves. **We are all as one entity, one body. You and somebody may have some fight but when it comes to vote time you should not take that as an opportunity to assault that person or talking bad.**” (Bawku 33, Youth Man, Control)*

- UND Study

DO YOUTH⁵ PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR NETWORKS MAINTAIN THE FOLLOWING BEHAVIORS OVER TIME AS COMPARED TO SIMILAR YOUTH WHO DID NOT PARTICIPATE IN THE PROGRAM?

UND researchers found the following:

- Two years after the project, people living in the target dioceses still demonstrated a strong preference for peace.
- Potential voters responded favorably to candidates who strongly denounced violence and who advocated punishment for their own supporters, who engaged in acts of violence.
- During campaigns, youth were most critical of candidates with a lenient message toward violence, and who shirked responsibility for violence. But they were also more likely than their elders to involve themselves in vigilante groups⁶ that perpetuated violence. Youth were also less likely to attempt to halt conflict when it occurred.
- Compared with their elders, youth were less likely to choose candidates with lenient stances on the use of violence. However, they were more accepting of violent tactics, for example, violence against government workers or destruction of property.
- Respondents who identified themselves with youth or vigilante groups were more likely to experience violence than non-members.
- Peace messages had staying power. In addition to recalling specific messages related to peace promotion, respondents had internalized the logic of the messages.
- YPAs who indicated that they had a positive experience overall reported that project strategies like community sensitization and early warning systems had a notable impact on their communities.

⁵ In this report, younger people are defined as 35 years or younger. Older people are 36 years or older.

⁶ Often referred to colloquially as “macho men,” these groups comprise intimidating young men belonging to partisan youth groups or youth parliaments. They are vigilantes with offices that boast decorations and regalia. They often loiter around polling places, and may be solicited by a local power broker “to deal violently with” an individual who advocates for an opposing party.

"I wouldn't have been thinking about peace...That training really shaped my instincts towards peace and I embraced peace at that moment. It transformed the individual. [T]he training wasn't just about the society, but the individual step because you have to be able to control yourself before you can speak about peace to the other party, so without training yourself you cannot train someone else. So we are there to transform ourselves to transform the society. So the training really transformed me...It was indeed a success. ... That is why you never recorded violence anywhere. It was peaceful and successful." Youth Ambassador from Damongo, Ghana

- UND Study

- Youth leaders who felt marginalized from the political system also yearned for greater inclusion and engagement in future local politics.
- Many who heard of the YPA Program wanted it expanded so that others could benefit.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

1. *Increase youth engagement more purposefully around and outside of electoral processes drawing on other CRS programs and local networks.*

CRS could target youth in "Ambassador" roles in other programming areas, such as conservation and sustainability. Funding for youth forums would allow groups to express their political views and policy ideas in the election off-season, gain recognition from other groups, and increase their self-worth by contributing to community causes.

2. *Improve targeting of potential spoilers, such as party vigilantes and geographic areas in coordination with other actors to increase reach of messaging and allow for more rigorous evaluations.*

In UND's sample, 42 individuals self-identified as inactive members of a vigilante organization; another 21 stated they were active members; nine claimed to be leaders and organizers. Identifying attributes of potential spoilers can help CRS target them. In its sample, UND found that vigilante affiliates tended to be young males with higher levels of formal education and cash incomes, active in religious organizations. However, in CRS/Ghana's experience, rank-and-file vigilante group members tend to be unemployed school dropouts. Whether one engages this demographic through faith networks and secondary schools or opts for skills training may well be determined by a sound understanding of social complexity.

Improving geographic targeting could also help establish a more robust comparison group for counterfactuals. CRS should purposefully select control areas from the start of a program. By coordinating with other actors disseminating similar messaging, CRS would also be able to concentrate on areas – such as rural communities – that may not receive the same frequency of messaging as other, more saturated areas – such as urban or peri-urban settings.

3. *Enhance stakeholders' understanding of voter preferences related to violence.*

CRS should inform faith leaders, political parties and their candidates that youth prefer peaceful electoral processes, but they lack the power and resources to affect outcomes. Their agency is constrained by rigid social norms. CRS programming should continue to target youth as political actors and find ways to empower them within the social structure of their communities.

4. *Collaborate with other stakeholders to promote multiple peace messages.*

Per the UND study, when people heard YPA messages in combination with or supplemented by other NGO peace messages, the likelihood of an individual attempting to halt an act of violence was increased. Peace messaging from multiple sources had a cumulative impact. CRS should join with peer organizations and local partners to coordinate peace messaging to ensure broad, diverse, and dense coverage.