



A Qualitative Assessment of Pathways to Youth Inclusion

in Afghanistan

April 2020

Supported by



RAPID SOCIAL RESPONSE



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1818 H Street NW Washington DC 20433
Telephone: 202-473-1000
Internet: www.worldbank.org

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Acknowledgements

This report was written by Sara Lenehan (Consultant), as part of a World Bank effort led by Shubha Chakravarty (Social Protection and Jobs), Palwasha Mirbacha (Education), Sarah Elizabeth Haddock (Social Development), Maria Virginia Ceretti (Consultant) provided valuable inputs, and Masooma Ahmadi (Social Protection and Jobs) provided support in Kabul. Comments from peer reviewers Jana El Horr (Social Development), Miriam Muller (Poverty and Equity), and Juan David Baron (Education) were gratefully received. The team wishes to recognize the generous award of a grant from the World Bank's Rapid Social Response Trust Fund Program, which is supported by the Russian Federation, United Kingdom, Norway, Sweden, Australia, Denmark, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation without which this work would not have been possible.

Data collection for this study was managed by Samuel Hall. We are grateful to Marion Guillaume, Emma Allen, Daron Mackie, and Jawid Hassanzai and the rest of the team for their collaboration during the design and analysis stages.

The Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development of Afghanistan and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance of Afghanistan provided generous guidance throughout the implementation of the study. The team thanks the staff of the Facilitating Partners of the Citizens' Charter National Priority Program in Nangarhar and Herat, and the local authorities who assisted in field access. Representatives of GIZ and USAID provided engagement and advice over the course of the study, which was greatly appreciated.

Most of all, the study team thanks the nearly 200 Afghan youth who graciously shared their time, by participating in interviews and focus group discussions.

Acronyms

ALCS	Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey
CDC	Community Development Council
CCDC	Cluster CDC
CCNPP	Citizens' Charter National Priority Program
CS	Case Study
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FLFP	Female Labor Force Participation
FP	Facilitating Partner
GA	Gozar Assemblies
GoIRA	Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
KII	Key Informant Interviews
MCCG	Maintenance Cash and Construction Grant
MOLSA	Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs
MRRD	Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
PES	Private Employment Service
SO	Social Organizer
ToR	Terms of Reference
TVET	Technical Vocational Education and Training
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WEE-RDP	Women Economic Empowerment - Rural Development Project
YSC	Youth Sub-committee

Executive Summary

Overview

Afghanistan has one of the youngest populations in the world, with two-thirds of the population being below the age of 25.¹ With the right skills and opportunities, young Afghans have the potential to be a source of social progress, entrepreneurship, and economic growth for their country. However, current data point to underdevelopment and underutilization of Afghan youth's human capital. Most young Afghans will not complete secondary school, and 42 percent of people ages 15–24 are not in education, employment or training (NEET) with figures higher for women at 68 percent. An ongoing context of fragility exacerbates the challenges faced by young Afghans. Apart from imposing a tremendous human cost in terms of injury, displacement, and psychosocial issues, conflict has weakened public institutions and by extension the services to youth—particularly in the harder-to-reach rural areas. This context of fragility has also impeded and (recently slowed) Afghanistan's economic development. Current forecasts indicate that the economy will at best absorb half of the 400,000 new workers predicted to enter the domestic labor market annually over the next decade.

In this context, fostering the economic and social inclusion of Afghan youth presents a distinct development challenge. In recent years, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GoIRA) and other development partners have invested in several initiatives to bolster the inclusion of youth. Many of these initiatives have focused on the expansion of education and livelihood opportunities for youth or their communities. A continuing concern is how to effectively package and implement programs in ways that reach broader segments of youth, that resonate with them and meet their demands, and that generate benefits for themselves and their communities. The importance of meeting this challenge extends beyond economic gains, and toward fostering well-being and social cohesion. There is strong evidence that social

exclusion and violence can increase in the context of youth bulges and limited economic opportunities.

This study analyses pathways to youth inclusion in Afghanistan. The findings are intended to inform the work of the GoIRA and relevant stakeholders working on the youth agenda in Afghanistan. Development interventions targeting Afghan youth must recognize the full range of their economic, education, social, and psychological needs through a holistic development approach. Crucially, they must be developed through engagements with youth themselves. Accordingly, this study is framed around two objectives:

- 1. Understanding Pathways to Youth Inclusion.** Through conversations with youth, this study seeks to understand youth's aspirations, the terms on which they wish to be included, and what they view as the main barriers and enablers to their inclusion. Special attention is paid to the different social contexts in which youth live, between provinces and across urban and rural areas.
- 2. Assessing the Youth Sub-Committees (YSCs) under the Citizens' Charter National Priority Program (CCNPP).** The GoIRA has initiated the CCNPP to improve the delivery of core infrastructure and social services to participating communities in Afghanistan, through strengthened Community Development Councils (CDCs). There is current interest in understanding if and how CDCs can be utilized to expand youth programming, specifically through their 'YSCs'. Through conversations with YSC members and youth in their communities, this study aims to understand the institutional capacity and interest of YSCs to serve this purpose.

Findings are based on fieldwork commissioned in rural and urban districts of Nangarhar and Herat, across 14 CDCs. One hundred and ninety-six youth (both YSC and non-YSC members) were interviewed, along with community leaders and other local stakeholders.

¹ All statistics presented in this section are from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Central Statistics Organization. Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey (ALCS) 2016–2017, adjusted for the age range of 15–29.

Key Findings: Understanding Pathways to Youth Inclusion

Pathways to Inclusion: Jobs

Beyond economic costs, male youth unemployment and underemployment is generating social costs in both urban and rural areas. Of all the challenges faced by youth, young men and women raised unemployment as the most pressing. However, they were usually referencing 'male unemployment.' Youth in this study reported a link between male unemployment and depression, family conflict, drug addiction, antisocial behavior and crime, and anti-government sentiment. As young men bear the moral responsibility of acting as 'breadwinners', an inability to grow into this role can result in substantial shame and loss of self-esteem. In Nangarhar, youth raised some demand for psychosocial support to alleviate the effects of unemployment, although the avenues for providing this should be explored against available services.

The desire for stable, sustainable employment is strong in both urban and rural areas. This demand is unlikely to be met in the current context of slow economic growth, which calls for alternative mechanisms to bolster youth inclusion. Meeting the demand for jobs is tied, among other things, to the realization of effective short- and long-term economic development policies. Meanwhile, a realistic view must take into account the many youths who are unlikely to secure stable employment in the short to medium term, and who are already feeling frustrated as a result. Fostering the social inclusion of these youth will likely require alternative avenues through which to positively engage them in their communities. Volunteering and community work might be one option.

In rural areas, short-term construction and infrastructure projects are offering relief to families in need of income. Capacity constraints mean that not all youth can get involved in these projects. Nor do these programs necessarily reserve spaces for younger youth, ages 25 or younger. Rural youth in Nangarhar and Herat were able to point to previous construction projects implemented in their communities by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) or other organizations (for example, the Swedish Committee in Nangarhar). The study found high demand for more of these projects. However, due to

their short-term nature, such initiatives are in and of themselves unlikely to satisfy youths' desires for longer-term stable employment. Further, on account of equity, some programs are careful to select only one participant per family. Given intergenerational hierarchies, it is not clear that families would nominate younger youth for these programs, where elder brothers are also in need of work. Where incomes are channeled back to households, then the net effect on household income might be the same regardless of who the family selects for the program. However, younger youth may thus miss out on opportunities to expand skills and build self-esteem, adding to their exclusion.

For women who desire to work, a lack of female-'appropriate' work is a problem. The study confirms the importance of close attention to local gender norms, which vary significantly across Afghanistan. Social restrictions on women's mobility and work were strongest in rural Nangarhar, over Herat (though even here, they were persistent). Regardless of context however, it was often the case that women's work was not objected to per se, but rather the nature of work and where it was conducted. Creating female-appropriate avenues for employment, in which both women and their families feel comfortable for women to participate, is thus a challenge. Projects like Women Economic Empowerment - Rural Development Project (WEE-RDP) hold promise of improving pathways for women's employment while affording communities control in assessing appropriate physical spaces in which women may work. A challenge for such projects will be to engage younger women. Women who are not yet married may in some communities face higher restrictions on mobility and participation, in attempts to protect honor.

Pathways to Economic Inclusion through Education and Skills Training

After decades of it being in short supply, Afghan youth are attaching significant social value to education. This should be taken into account when reading 'demands' for education—it's not just about jobs. Education generates significant social capital among segments of Afghan youth, and the rollout of free and subsidized education opportunities are valued highly. Lack of education facilities (secondary and training) is one means through which rural youth feel 'left behind'. In real terms, local factors constrain participation in education at both the secondary and tertiary levels,

even where it is available. The main reasons for early school dropout of boys is poverty and the need to support family (World Bank 2019a). For girls it is gender norms, especially fear of shame and early marriage, and the overlapping effects of poverty. Security challenges, such as during travel and while at school are also critical contributing factors (Ministry of Education, UNICEF, and Samuel Hall 2018; World Bank 2019a). Keeping youth in school requires working with communities to change gender norms, promoting education among elders, and reducing poverty.

For illiterate youth and youth who left school without a diploma, skills training provided by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) can fill an aspirational gap for education and present the most realistic avenue for extending skills to rural youth. Demand for more of these courses appeared to be high. Examples of those positively received included courses such as beekeeping, cheese-making, or cell-phone repair. The report finds that these courses can build self-esteem and provide an enjoyable way for youth to spend time. However, demand for these courses may not necessarily be indicative of longer-term interest to work in these fields or local demand for their outputs. Indeed, many of these courses are inherently inflexible. They provide a narrow set of hard skills while relying on the existence of local economies to translate these skills into income. Given current delivery constraints, short-term community-based skills training is the more credible option for getting skills to rural youth, but evidence-based approaches are needed to make sure these programs are effective.

The high proportion of educated, unemployed, urban youth shows that technical vocational education and training (TVET) and tertiary education programs do not always fulfill their promise of gains. Considerable frustration and malaise can result. While education levels affect the type of employment that youth go into, education is not necessarily a good predictor of employment, and unemployment levels are comparable across all education levels. The study finds a strong perception that ‘connections’ are required to access certain types of employment, especially in the public sector and government. Despite a small number of job-search platforms, geared mainly toward the public sector, most Afghan youths hear about job opportunities through social connections. This may inflate perceptions of corruption in a context where jobs are in any case few.

Demand among both rural and urban women for tailoring courses and other courses that have affinities with housework are high, but alternatives to them are few. These courses have the added benefit of being easily conducted from home; overcoming social constraints on mobility outside the home (where relevant) and allowing work to be more easily integrated with housework. It is unclear to what extent supply is stimulating women’s demand for these programs; rural women, in particular, seem to have few alternatives. Further, these courses do not necessarily have the intended effects of stimulating women’s participation in paid work, as some women participate to gain skills that they can apply in the course of their domestic work.

Pathways to Inclusion: Voice and Participation

Even when presented with opportunities, youth may lack the agency to access them or risk being left vulnerable if they do. Strong social organization around family, combined with a lack of social protection mechanisms, means that many Afghans are dependent on their social networks for social and economic survival. Youth can be particularly vulnerable in this regard, as they have not yet achieved the social and financial capital needed to exert influence on their networks, or to act independently of them. It is perhaps not surprising that many of the Afghan youth interviewed for the study expressed ‘family support’ and ‘family permission’ as crucial to the realization of their aspirations, outside of economic constraints. The study uncovered some areas of intergenerational tension:

- **Participation in education.** As numerous other studies have shown, gender norms and financial precarity were critical constraints in the uptake of education, especially beyond the primary level. Parents and youth can have differing views on the saliency of these constraints. Some male and female youth in this study were of the view that their families simply placed less value in education than they did and thus were less willing to support its pursuit, especially if that meant forgoing family income or (in the case of young women) potentially facing social stigma.
- **Participation in community youth groups and other organizations.** Families may have reservations about the usefulness of participation in these youth groups. YSCs were in some cases viewed as ‘un-Islamic’, or a waste of time by

families. The potential for these groups to infringe upon or play against other community power structures can exacerbate this problem. This underscores the importance of sensitizing and onboarding communities to the function of community structures such as the YSCs and the CDCs.

- **Women’s participation in all of the above domains.** Even where families see value in women’s education, fear of ‘shame’ can constrain willingness to permit women to participate. The same applies to work outside the home. Interviews indicate that some families would be willing to permit participation if the associated social costs were not so great. This suggests two challenges. The first is to create spaces for education, work, and social participation that are palatable to young women and their families. The second is to explore avenues for reducing stigma to women’s participation in these domains at the community level, which has already proven effective in some locations.

Afghan youth express low trust in government institutions but respond positively where the government gets it right. The study confirms survey data, that shows that trust in government institutions is low in Afghanistan.² Poor infrastructure is one way in which rural youth claim they are being ‘ignored’ over urban Afghans. The need for ‘support from the government’ was repeatedly raised in the context of infrastructure, education, and jobs creation.

Key Findings: Assessing Youth Sub-Committees (YSCs)

Different Operational Contexts of the YSCs (and CDCs)

The YSCs’ official mandate is very broad, leaving the objectives and activities of the YSCs open to substantial local-level definition. The responsibilities of each sub-committee are set out in an individual Terms of Reference (ToR) in the Citizens’ Charter training manuals. Unlike other CDC sub-committees, YSCs are not tasked with the receipt, management, and monitoring of specific services. They are mainly directed to react to the needs of the community or to help other CDC sub-committees. They are also asked to create an action plan to “uplift

the community and contributing toward pro-poor development.” While the action plan in theory provides YSCs with substantial scope for self-definition, a lack of direction from CCNPP also leaves YSCs particularly open to definition by others at the local level (including the CDC as a whole, community power interests, and intergenerational dynamics). In several rural locations visited, YSCs struggled to expand beyond the role of helping other committees, and others were entirely inactive.

Distinctions can be drawn between the operational contexts of rural and urban YSCs. As compared to urban areas, rural CDCs are more likely to operate in contexts where population densities are lower, societies are more homogenous, and social connections stronger. Further, the social boundaries of the CDCs are more likely to align with socially recognized boundaries (or ‘communities’) than in the urban areas. It is crucial to note that *the study observed more variation between the activities and capacities of different rural YSCs, than between rural and urban YSCs.* Thus, local-level factors should be taken into account in the first instance. With that said, the following broad distinctions can be drawn between urban and rural YSCs, which can translate into different barriers and enablers to YSC work:

- **Access to NGOs and other organizations for partnerships.** These organizations tend to be concentrated in urban areas, and often lack comparable on-the-ground presence in the rural areas. The study found that even within the urban YSCs, there was scope to expand networking between YSCs and these other organizations, and not all urban YSC members took equal initiative in seeking out partnerships despite their proximity. Depending on their remoteness, rural YSC members may need to show even greater initiative in securing this type of outreach. Further, local factors may constrain rural YSCs’ capacity to connect with these other actors independently, as they in many cases access communities via CDCs, government or other local power brokers in the first instance. Rural YSCs were waiting to be ‘approached’ by organizations via the CDC structure, and revealed higher levels of dependence on the CDC as a whole.
- **Interaction with other YSCs and youth associations.** The report found more regular

² For example, Afghanistan currently ranks 177 out of 180 countries in the Transparency International Corruptions Perception Index 2017.

contact between urban YSCs and neighboring YSCs and youth associations. This can be explained by their relative proximity, and also the blurring of community lines which can lead to shared interests across boundaries. Most rural YSCs studied did not actively partner with neighboring YSCs (despite existing in the same 'cluster'). Aside from distance, rural YSCs can face additional logistical constraints in these types of partnerships. Conflict and insecurity can limit travel to neighboring communities for both men and women. Restrictions on women's mobility can serve as another constraint.

- **Visibility within the community.** Even in rural areas where both YSC and non-YSC interviews suggested low levels of YSC activity, non-YSC youth were still more likely to have heard of the YSCs than in urban YSCs (although this finding could be tested further). On the one hand, higher visibility presents an opportunity for youth mobilization via the YSCs in rural areas. On the other, the higher visibility of YSCs (and, by extension, CDCs) can overexpose failures. This was apparent in some rural areas where YSCs were scorned for being 'inactive', 'useless', or 'un-Islamic'.
- **Embeddedness in community power dynamics and recourse against them.** Intergenerational power dynamics within the broader community can rob YSCs of voice and agency. While this phenomenon is not exclusive to rural YSCs, they are often more pronounced. This matter is exacerbated in cases where funding and other materials, including places to conduct meetings, are solicited from others within the community.

Mobilization capacities of YSCs likely rest on local trust in, and local influence of, the CDCs. This can vary across communities. Survey data suggests that roughly 60 percent of Afghans would say that they 'trust' the CDCs (Asia Foundation 2019). However, considerable variations should be expected between communities, as residents may look to and trust alternative (and potentially competing) institutions, such as village elders, the malik, mosque leaders or other political actors. Further, 'trust' placed in CDCs may not translate into abilities to participate in or openly support that institution, for example, out of fear of local retaliation. Given intergenerational power dynamics, youth may be even more constrained in such participation. In testing and rollout of interventions via the YSCs, it may be productive to identify and work in those areas where the CDCs are known to be relatively established and

where constraints on local participation are not so significant. This could be done with the assistance of the Facilitating Partners (FPs) of CCNPP.

It would appear that some YSCs benefit from stronger facilitation than others. In addition to different objectives, YSCs displayed different levels of organization, frequency of meetings, interaction with the CDCs, inclusivity (especially of women) and consistency of membership. Significant differences were observed between rural areas of each province. As with all sub-committees, YSCs receive active support and monitoring of FPs in the first three years of their inception. Male and female SOs are required to facilitate elections, and then visit communities twice a month in the first year, and then once a month in the second year. The study did not evaluate the extent of this assistance, although restrictions on accessing certain communities was noted (especially for female SOs). Conversations with FPs might help to disentangle what are local level constraints on YSC operations and shortfalls in facilitation.

YSCs and Youth Development: Current Activities and Interest

The YSC ToR is community-focused. To the extent YSCs identify youth as a specific beneficiary, it is on their initiative under the purview of the CDC. YSCs are unaligned in the extent to which they view: YSCs as a community versus youth-focused committee (or both), YSCs as a platform for youth empowerment, YSCs as a committee that mobilizes in the community, or that serves to mobilize other youth in the community. The study found rural YSCs more likely to take a community-oriented view of their purpose, and have this role reinforced by the CDC. Meanwhile, urban YSCs were more likely to view youth as the primary beneficiary of their work. This might be attributable to the different operational contexts of urban and rural YSCs, as mentioned above.

Where YSCs did identify youth as a specific beneficiary of their work, their aspirations mainly revolved around jobs and education. Their aspirations tended to outstrip their capacity significantly. Several rural YSCs and urban YSCs displayed high levels of initiative in creating opportunities for education and workplace training, like cell-phone repair or tailoring (for women). These initiatives seemed to be more successful in urban areas where access to resources was greater. However, there was an overwhelming view amongst both urban and rural YSCs that 'outside' assistance,

such as through government or NGOs, was required to help them further these two goals. In the rural areas, jobs facilitation was at times discussed in the context of scouting workers for projects that had entered via the CDC.

Youth representation/empowerment was a less-mentioned goal, although strong in some areas. 'Raising the voices of youth', or encouraging youth to be good and helpful members of their communities, was raised across several locations. In the urban areas, this aspiration at times bordered on what appeared to be youth activism (for example, through establishing meetings with government officials or campaigning activities). Due to the limited sample, the study cannot definitively establish a rural/urban pattern in this aspiration. However, the local context will realistically shape the extent to which youth are granted voice.

Inclusivity of the YSCs

The YSC ToR is not gender-neutral, which can have a negative impact on women's participation. The ToR in the Citizens' Charter training manuals maintains a strong focus on physical activity in the community, and the only youth-focused point is the creation of sports teams. Constraints on women's mobility mean that these points are highly inclusive of men over women. A lack of reference to activities that could solely be carried out by women means that female YSC members do not have any protected domains of responsibility. In some areas of rural Nangarhar, male YSC committees were relatively active while female YSC members largely appeared as an inactive shadow committee. Meanwhile, the most active YSCs in both provinces displayed a gendered division of labor, for example, with women focusing on activities in the domestic sphere or other activities that benefited women. This suggests scope for improving female participation where female-appropriate responsibilities and protections are in place.

Claims by female YSC members that men were not 'listening' to them were frequent. Aside from gender norms, this can also be attributed to coordination constraints and problems of meeting. Male and female YSC members tend to meet separately (as a rule in Nangarhar, and in many of the

rural areas in Herat). In some communities, female YSC members have developed mechanisms for cross-YSC communication, for example, nominating one point of contact. Other women informed us that they communicated via male relatives, which can have disempowering effects where male *mahrms* act as 'filters'. A workaround to this constraint is for female YSC members to communicate with female SOs, who then communicate with male SOs, who then communicate with male YSC members. It is not clear that women are relying on this mechanism. In any case, YSCs only receive active support and monitoring by FPs in the first three years of their inception. Thus, a sustainable solution is required to the problems of male/female coordination in the YSCs going forward.

YSCs are to be comprised solely of 'youth', which is defined as persons ages 18–35. There is no further breakdown of the youth category by age. YSC membership spans an age range of 17 years. Across this age range, one can expect substantial differences in the status of younger and older YSC members, in regard to marriage, number of children, employment and community position. This age range is also reflected in the membership of the CDC—where many members are technically also 'youth'. As the YSC ToR does not mention further subcategories of youth, there are no safeguards against intergenerational dynamics within the YSCs, including mechanisms to ensure younger youth are heard. To the extent any intervention planned through the YSCs is intended for a specific age category of youth (for example, 15–24), this would need to be clearly stipulated in the design of that intervention. The interview data did not strongly suggest that being married and having children was a significant barrier to YSC participation.³ Thus there does not seem to be an obvious age ceiling (marriage) to YSC participation.

The study revealed a relative lack of perceived elitism in the YSCs, among non-YSC youth. As in the case of all sub-committees, YSCs are designed to be representative of their communities. However, the election process outlined in the Citizens' Charter training manuals does not control longer-term participation. The YSCs visited showed that beyond the initial selection stage, membership and participation could expand or contract, mainly due to work commitments or lack of perceived personal benefits. There is some suggestion, therefore that

³ The current sample contains 84 YSC members: 40 percent were either married or engaged, with figures equal for men and women. This reflected the marriage make-up of active YSC members in the locations visited. A larger sample would be required to confirm the effects of marriage on YSC participation.

YSCs are a meaningful way to engage unemployed youth or those who are not otherwise 'busy'. The practical barriers youth face in becoming members, or remaining members, of the YSCs can affect the representativeness of the YSCs. However, even if YSCs are not fully representative, this need not mean their programming is not inclusive as long as appropriate safeguards and training are put in place.

Recommendations

For Strengthening YSC Implementation

Changes in Citizens' Charter operational guidelines and their implementation can address some barriers to YSC capacity and inclusivity.

- **Address the current gender imbalance in the YSC ToR.** This could include defining specific responsibilities for women, in a way that does not limit their work to those responsibilities. Another is further orienting YSCs to women as beneficiaries of their work (which may have the indirect effect of mobilizing women in the community to help them).
- **Revisit mechanisms for overcoming coordination issues, where male and female YSC members meet separately.** The FPs could be engaged to establish mechanisms for coordination across communities, that take into account different gender norms. Sustainable options and back-up mechanisms should be decided on with FPs and put in place where face-to-face communication is not possible between YSC members.
- **Visit barriers and enablers of cross-YSC partnerships in rural areas.** Beyond meetings at the cluster level, discuss the realistic options for cross-YSC coordination of activities and the benefits of doing so.

For Youth-Focused YSC Programming

Interest and enthusiasm are the decisive factors of YSC membership, and YSC members want to do more. The YSCs thus present an opportunity to

engage Afghan youth, especially in harder-to-reach rural areas. The success of such an engagement would remain to be seen, but the following could be considered:

- **Consider to what extent YSCs are to focus on youth as beneficiaries. If there is an appetite for this, some further institutional definition of the YSCs might be required.** Further definition could seek to 'safeguard' the youth orientation at the local level, and also orient FPs to train YSC members in their youth-focused programming. Additions could also be made to strengthen the participation of 'younger youth', or other vulnerable subcategories of youth.
- **Find ways to support YSCs in raising 'youth voices' beyond the community level, including through strengthened participation models.** While some YSCs already do this, they are not specifically trained in or directed to gather the views and opinions of youth or communicate them. Meetings are not necessarily open to non-YSC youth. Further training and support of YSCs in this regard would be required if YSCs are to truly serve as a platform for youth.
- **Explore avenues to facilitate partnerships between NGOs and YSCs.** Supporting the personal initiative of YSC members through training might be one avenue. Realistically, however, YSCs will continue to be dependent on outreach by stakeholders or programs that are created with them in mind. Raising the visibility of the YSCs among these stakeholders, including by making clear how they serve to benefit youth, could promote such coordination.
- **Continue to work at the community level to understand the power dynamics and social constraints of the YSCs.** Ensuring that YSCs have an appropriate meeting place, that is not tied to local power interests, could be an easy win in protecting their and the CDCs' relative autonomy. Nevertheless, rapid assessments of institutional power structures of these communities—including the compounding effects of intergenerational hierarchies—would be needed in advance of programming via the YSCs. Given the current context of fragility, there is likely to be differences between communities in how conducive engagement with the YSCs will be to reaching Afghan youth.

For Other Youth Programming

- **Strengthen dialogue and work with government counterparts to develop a shared commitment to youth inclusion, including through specification of priority objectives.** The study shows the importance of complementing data and statistical analysis with a grounded understanding of the social barriers to youth inclusion. Addressing these barriers could at times involve discussing sensitive topics such as anti-government sentiment, ethnic marginalization, and gender norms. Policies such as the *Afghanistan National Youth Policy* present a meaningful starting point for such dialogue, which can be used to prioritize the youth inclusion agenda.
- **Consider the addition of youth-inclusion sub-objectives across existing projects.** A number of national projects currently indirectly benefit youth without explicitly defining them as a target beneficiary group, such as the Maintenance Cash and Construction Grant (MCCG), Targeting the Ultra Poor, and WEE-RDP. Youth may join these programs, but their participation is not protected nor are the additional barriers to their participation addressed (such as the possibility of elder sons being selected for MCCG, or the additional social and mobility constraints of younger, unmarried women in the case of WEE-RDP). It would be beneficial to review these and other projects on a case-by-case basis to consider how their designs could be adjusted to strengthen younger-youth participation.
- **Complement economic inclusion efforts with interventions that bolster social cohesion.** The study has shown that a focus on economic inclusion alone is unlikely to meet the multidimensional challenges that lead to youth exclusion. Further, while many young Afghan women aspire to work, a substantial number do not, and even with substantial job creation Afghan youth who do aspire to work are unlikely to have this aspiration met. An agenda that focuses on job creation and skills training alone is likely to pass these youth by and miss opportunities for social cohesion, particularly among disaffected young men. Strengthening of mental health and substance abuse services, interventions for conflict management and expansion of voluntary activities could all be considered.
- **Engage youth as agents of change in their communities through government channels.** This may be one of the most promising points of intervention for rural youth, many of whom feel left behind by government on the one hand, and disempowered in their communities on the other. Interventions that engage youth as agents of change in their communities and that engage them in government programming could be useful in both building social cohesion and bolstering goodwill with the government. YSCs are an obvious mechanism through which to do this, but other avenues could be explored.
- **Focus on the expansion of skills-based training in the rural areas, but with a critical eye on livelihood creation.** Good evidence on the effectiveness of short-term training programs is currently lacking, although they appear to be in high demand among rural youth. The reasons for this demand are diffuse and not linked to job creation alone. Working with communities to explore required skills, including in the field of agriculture where most youth are likely to remain employed, should form the basis of future investments in this area.
- **Project design should take into consideration the specific disadvantages faced by Afghan youth compared to older generations, and intersecting vulnerabilities.** Afghanistan's youth bulge, economic downturn, and context of fragility is negatively affecting the current generation of Afghan youth. This situation is exacerbated for rural youth. Women and youth who lack the social networks to help them 'get by' (internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees, orphans) also face intersecting vulnerabilities—not all of which can be reduced to economic exclusion. Project design should seek to empower youth within these social networks while screening for potential disruptions that could further disempower youth—for example, by inciting intergenerational or intergroup tensions or creating community divisions around gender.

Introduction

Background

Afghanistan has one of the youngest populations in the world. Almost 80 percent of the population is under 35.⁴ Most youth fall within the lower age range of the 'youth' category, which reflects Afghanistan's high birth rate. Approximately 21 percent of Afghans are between the ages of 15 and 24. The largest proportion of Afghanistan's population, just under half at 47 percent, is below the age of 15. The youth of Afghanistan is geographically dispersed, with over 72 percent living in rural areas. They mostly live in households with vulnerable income sources such as agriculture, livestock, and day labor. More than 75 percent of Afghans have experienced displacement at one point in their lifetime. This mass population displacement is indicative of the extent of suffering from war and disruption in public life, associated psychosocial issues, and access to services like education and health.

Current data point to an underutilization of Afghan youth's potential. Most Afghan youth experience poor or no employment, and

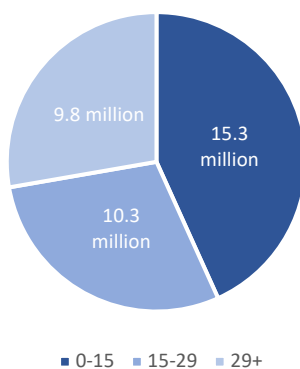
education outcomes are low. After a decade of rapid gains following 2001, there has been a plateauing of employment and education indicators for youth. Altogether, youth account for 38 percent of labor force participants in Afghanistan—a rate that is lower than the rest of the adult population. Of the youth who are employed, only 18 percent have secure, salaried jobs. Currently, 42 percent of people ages 15–24 are not in education, employment, or training (NEET), and figures are much higher for women, at 68 percent. The majority of Afghan youth will not complete their secondary education. Slow economic growth currently constrains the capacity of the Afghan economy to provide salaried jobs to the estimated 400,000 youth entering the job market annually.

An ongoing context of fragility exacerbates the challenges faced by young Afghans and poses risks to this generation of youth. As well as imposing a tremendous human cost in terms of injury, displacement, and psychosocial issues, conflict has impeded the development of public institutions and service delivery—particularly in the harder to reach rural areas. This context of fragility has also

Figure 1: Youth by Population Percentage, Age, and Location

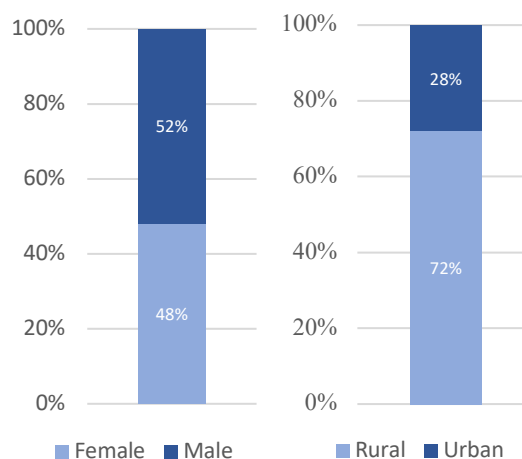
Population by Age

Nearly 2/3 of Afghanistan's citizens are below the age of 25, and half are below the age of 15.



Youth by Gender and Rural/Urban

The vast majority of youth are rural.



Source: ALCS 2016–2017, adjusted by authors for the age range 15–29.

⁴ All statistics presented in this section are from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Central Statistics Organization. Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey (ALCS) 2016–2017, adjusted for the age range of 15–29. For an explanation of this age selection, see 'methodology'.

weakened (and recently slowed) Afghanistan's economic development. The poverty rate in Afghanistan increased from 38 percent in 2011/2012 to 55 percent in 2016/2017. As pressure on job creation and service delivery continues, and as over half of Afghans continue to live below the poverty line, the capacity of youth to rise above current living conditions remains constrained. Empirical data from Afghanistan and elsewhere suggest that unemployment among young men, in particular, can lead to frustration and alienation—opening up the pathways to societal conflict.

In recent years, there has been substantial investment in initiatives for Afghanistan's youth, by the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GoIRA) as well as development partners and international organizations, but not all youth have benefited equally. Among these initiatives are investments in literacy, primary and secondary education, free higher education, as well as formal and informal Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs. The little data available on these programs show that they do not always result in skills attainment or help to secure employment outcomes. Furthermore, these and other programs have been rolled out in select locations only, with a skew toward the urban areas. International indices suggest high levels of inequality in Afghanistan based on social characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, poverty, and location.⁵

The Citizens Charter National Priority Program (CCNPP) is one development project currently working with youth. The CCNPP is an initiative of the Government of Afghanistan introduced in late 2016, to improve the delivery of core infrastructure, emergency services, and social services to participating communities. Services are primarily provided through strengthened Community Development Councils (CDCs), which are institutions elected locally through a participatory process, and staffed by unpaid volunteers. Each CDC presides over several thematic sub-committees, one of which is 'Youth Sub-Committees' (YSCs). YSCs are mandated to work with CDCs and their sub-committees to mobilize youth to the benefit of their communities. Given the

potential for YSCs to directly engage with youth, there is current interest in understanding if and how the work of the YSCs could be utilized to expand youth programming and benefit youth.

There is an ongoing need to effectively package and implement programs in ways that reach broader segments of youth and generate gains for themselves and their communities. The GoIRA, together with the World Bank, has embarked on a multisectoral engagement on youth inclusion in Afghanistan, that seeks to ensure that development interventions targeting youth take their needs and risks into greater consideration. This study builds on this engagement, by assessing pathways to youth inclusion in Afghanistan. The findings are intended to inform the work of the GoIRA and relevant stakeholders working on the youth agenda in Afghanistan.

Why Youth Inclusion? Study Framework and Objective

The term 'social inclusion' is the process of improving the terms on which people take part in society. In 2013, the World Bank flagship report *Inclusion Matters* identified three interrelated domains through which individuals and groups seek to participate in society: (a) *markets* (including jobs, land, housing, and credit markets); (b) *services* (including social protection, information, electricity, transport, education, health, water services); and (c) *spaces* (including political, physical, cultural, social spaces). Exclusion from these domains can undermine personal well-being, result in underutilization of citizens' human capital, and generate broader economic costs (World Bank 2013b). Social exclusion also has social and political costs, where groups perceive disadvantages over others.

Youth can face barriers to inclusion, which are specific to their age and generation. The term 'social exclusion' is typically applied to people who are disadvantaged based on their identities, for example, ethnic identity, gender, region, or disability status. As youth is a life stage that affects everyone, it

⁵ For example, Afghanistan is ranked 144 out of 146 countries on the 2018 Social Progress Index, and 132 under its 'inclusiveness' sub-index. The 'inclusiveness' sub-index of the Social Progress Index includes several indicators such as 'acceptance of gays and lesbians', 'discrimination and violence against minorities', 'equality of political power by gender', 'equality of political power by socioeconomic position', and 'equality of political power by social group'.

can be easy to overlook youth as a basis of exclusion. However, youth can face specific challenges accessing markets, services, and spaces. Despite being expected to take on higher levels of responsibility, young people often lack the seniority and influence to affect critical areas of their lives, whether in work, education decisions, or local decision making (Bucholtz 2002; Huijsmans et al. 2014; Silver 2007). Further, as economic and political contexts shift over time, different generations of youth can face unique challenges and vulnerabilities which contribute to the basis of their exclusion. In the current setting of fragility and a youth bulge, for example, today's generation Afghan youth face great challenges to the job market and are at risk of the effects of conflict.

Where youth also occupy other marginalized identities, the barriers to inclusion can be even greater. Of particular concern in Afghanistan are the systematically lower employment and education outcomes among rural youth versus urban youth, and young women versus men overall. The existing literature in Afghanistan also shows ethnicity, IDP/returnee status, and disability as characteristics that exclude individuals' participation in markets, services, and spaces (World Bank 2019b). It is, of course, possible for a young person to occupy one or more of these identities, in which case barriers to inclusion can increase. For example, we can expect a young female IDP to face more significant barriers to inclusion than a young male who is not an IDP.

Youth inclusion is important to development outcomes. With the right skills and opportunities, young Afghans have the potential to be a source of social progress and economic growth for their country. Countries with a large youth population have the potential to reap a 'demographic dividend'—as a larger share of the population within working age. Reaping this dividend requires the creation of opportunities for youth to participate in the economy, and also strategic planning to equip youth with marketable skills (World Bank 2013b). While including youth in the labor market can benefit the economy, excluding them has particularly damaging effects. A large out-of-work youth bulge puts financial strain on the few that do work. As well as undermining personal well-being, exclusion can erode social cohesion; which is the willingness of people to engage and cooperate with each other (World Bank 2013c). Promoting youth inclusion is thus critical to the development of longer term, sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

Based on existing data and policy concerns in the context of Afghanistan, this study focuses on three critical domains of inclusion for Afghan youth: jobs, education, and voice and participation. Poor indicators for Afghan youth in employment and education outcomes is a strong justification for focusing on the first two domains. 'Voice and participation' are also selected, as inclusive development is more likely when people are similarly empowered to have their voices heard in decision-making institutions (World Bank 2013b). The focus here is on local decision-making institutions, including under the CCNPP.

This study is framed around two objectives:

- 1. Understanding Pathways to Youth Inclusion.** Through conversations with youth ages 15–29, this study seeks to (a) describe young people's aspirations for the future and the real and perceived abilities and opportunities that shape those aspirations; (b) capture young Afghan men and women's perceptions of their inclusion in markets, services, and spaces; (c) identify key barriers to and enabling factors for meaningful youth inclusion, considering different profiles of youth; (d) understand how youth access information about the opportunities available to them and diagnose the factors that affect the take-up of those opportunities.
- 2. Assessing the YSCs under the CCNPP.** Through conversations with YSC members and youth in their communities, this study aims to (a) describe the youth groups, in terms of their membership, organizational structure, sources of resources, activities, capacity, and group aspirations; (b) distill the strengths and weaknesses of the youth groups in terms of their ability to engage a broad spectrum of youth and to serve as a platform for meaningful youth voice and participation; (c) shed light on the enabling factors and barriers facing the youth groups, including community perceptions of the youth groups; (d) capture the perceptions of youth (group member and non-members) regarding the capacity, inclusiveness, and services provided by the YSCs and other youth groups; (e) assess the institutional capacity and interest of the YSCs and other youth groups to assume additional responsibilities to advance youth development aims.

Report Structure

Section 1 introduces youth in their social and economic context. In doing so, the section provides a non-exhaustive overview of different lines of social exclusion identified among youth in the study, and complements this with available literature and data on the situation of youth in Afghanistan.

Part I then presents the bulk of data for objective 1: pathways to youth inclusion. This part considers three such pathways: economic inclusion (Section 2), inclusion in education (Section 3), and finally

inclusion in the form of voice and participation, with focus on participation in local decision making (Section 4).

Section 4 serves as an introduction of sorts to Part II, which presents the primary findings for objective 2, focusing on the YSCs. There are four sections: an overview of YSC goals and their purpose (Section 5); the inclusivity of YSCs (Section 6); barriers and constraints to their operations (Section 7); and the scope and interests for cross-YSC activities (Section 8).

The final section concludes with recommendations.

Methodology

Site Selection

This study is based on qualitative research with 196 youth in Nangarhar and Herat.⁶ The selection of these provinces followed a two-stage process. Firstly, to meet Objective 2 as well as Objective 1 of the study, the team narrowed the list of potential provinces to those in which the CCNPP has both urban and rural coverage.⁷ Secondly, from those four provinces, the study team chose two provinces determined to be sufficiently different from each other in terms of language and ethnic makeup, migration patterns, and gender indicators to enable meaningful cross-comparison and data collection. Within Herat and Nangarhar, the study team visited the provincial capitals and two rural districts. The rural districts comprised a district relatively far away and less accessible from the urban center, and a closer 'semi-rural' district. This selection allowed for comparison of data based on rurality.

For context, this study draws on national statistics from the *ALCS 2016–2017*, compiled by Afghanistan’s Central Statistics Organization.⁸

Data Collection Instruments

The study deployed five data collection instruments in each district visited, designed to provide a multi-angle analysis of youth and YSCs in their communities.

Instruments for data collection among youth

Interviews with youth were conducted using three instruments: *focus group discussions (FGDs) with YSC members, FGDs with non-YSC youth, and case studies* (one-on-one interviews).

Each instrument contained an average of 10 open-ended questions which were discussed over 2.5 hours in the case of FGDs and 1 hour in the case studies (CS). This format maximized the opportunity of respondents to offer information and to put experiences in their own words. The structure of FGD and CS with non-YSC youth covered aspirations of youth, the challenges and opportunities they faced in their communities, and the extent to which they felt other actors helped alleviate these challenges (be they community members, governmental or non-governmental organizations). The FGD instrument

Table 1: Sites Visited

Province	District	Communities*
Herat	Herat City	Omid Sabz, Seyed Qanad
	Karukh	Emam Fakhr Razi
	Zende Jan	Langar, Qala-e-Reg
Nangarhar	Jalalabad	Malang Jan, Mirak Bila, Mohammadi Sahibzadeh
	Kuz Kunar	Ahmad Baiq, Bar Kalay, Loy Kalai
	Dara-i-Nur	Changpur, Markazi Amla, Sholandi

Note: * 'Communities' here means communities as defined under the CCNPP. Each community listed has one CDC and, therefore, one YSC. The study identifies participants at the district level only to protect their confidentiality, with distinctions drawn between communities without calling them by name.

conducted with YSC members followed a similar structure, but with questions more focused on their

⁶ The World Bank developed the instruments and fieldwork strategy in conjunction with a research firm, Samuel Hall. Samuel Hall also conducted all fieldwork for this study, including the production and translation of transcripts.

⁷ In most provinces, the CCNPP has coverage in the rural areas only. At the time of writing, provinces that have CCNPP coverage in both rural and urban areas are: Balkh, Herat, Kandahar and Nangarhar.

⁸ ALCS sampled participants in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan for the indicators used here. For further details on the methodology of ALCS, see CSO 2018.

work and operations. Non-YSC youth were also asked to provide their views on the YSCs.

Instruments for data collection amongst other stakeholders

The study team also conducted *Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)* in each district visited. Key informants comprised a CDC chairperson, and at least one other person identified as influential in the lives of youth in that community (for example, maliks, teachers, donors to the CDC). KIIs contained a mixture of questions about the status of youth in the community and perceptions of the YSCs.

Finally, the study team distributed a written questionnaire to the *Social Organizers (SOs)* of the CCNPP, for each of the 14 communities visited. SOs are hired by Facilitating Partners (FPs) of the CCNPP to assist with the election, establishment, training, and ongoing monitoring of CDCs within the first three years of their inception. Questionnaires distributed to the SOs were conducted on an anonymous basis and allowed SOs to provide an assessment of the YSCs, describe their activities, and provide suggestions for their improvement.

Participants

Selection and profile of participants

This study collects data from youth aged between 15 and 29.⁹ All statistics and interview data presented in this report are for youth in this age range, unless stated otherwise.

The field team selected YSC members with the help of SOs and local CDCs, usually based on the list of YSC members maintained by the CDC. YSC membership, availability, and willingness to participate in the FGD discussion was the sole criteria for inclusion in the YSC FGDs. YSC participants comprised both committee members, as well as non-elected 'lay' members who were active in the YSCs. The demographic profiles of YSC members shifted by community, which forms part of the data in this report (see Part II).

For non-YSC FGDs and CS, youth were selected through snowball sampling at the local level, usually beginning with conversations with SOs. For both CS and non-YSC FGDs, care was taken to sample a diversity of ages, education backgrounds, ethnic and economic backgrounds, and marital status in all locations visited. FGDs with non-YSC youth were conducted separately for youth aged 18–29, and

Table 2: Qualitative Assessment Sample

Location	Communities	Focus Group Discussions			Total FGD Participants*	Case Studies	Key Informants
		YSC Youth	Non-YSC Youth (18–29)	Non-YSC Youth (15–17)			
<i>Herat</i>							
Herat City	2	3	2	—	30	3	4
Karukh	1	2	2	2	36	2	2
Zende Jan	2	2	2	—	24	3	2
<i>Nangarhar</i>							
Jalalabad	3	3	2	—	30	3	3
Kuz Kunar	3	2	2	2	36	3	2
Dara-i-Nur	3	2	2	—	24	2	2
Total	14	12	12	4	180	16	15

Note: * Average of six participants per focus group. Of the 180 youth interviewed in focus groups, 84 were YSC members and 94 non-YSC members.

⁹The Afghanistan National Youth Policy defines 'youth' as a person who is between the age of 18 and 35, and 'adolescents' as those aged between 12 and below 18. This study's sampling of persons aged between 15 and 29 is without prejudice to these definitions.

youth aged 15–17 inclusively.¹⁰ As most non-YSC FGD participants were over 18, for CS, the team oversampled youth ages between 15 and 17. Informed oral consent was obtained from all participants and recorded in their presence.¹¹

In both urban centers, the field team selected participants from the poorest known *nahias*. In rural areas, where possible, participants were selected on the basis of known family income and poverty, and the relative economic standing of participants was also noted on the basis of information provided in interviews. However, an analysis of household or community income was not carried out as part of the selection, and so descriptors of ‘poor’ and ‘non-poor’ as used in this study are based on self-reported data and perceptions from within communities.¹² In addition to CDC members, KIIs included community elders, members of local voluntary organizations, financial contributors to youth projects, and teachers. The field team selected the second KII through conversations with SOs and/or during discussions in the FGDs (YSC or non-YSCs).

FGD composition

Each FGD had an average of six participants, and all but one of the FGDs split according to gender. In Herat, one YSC FGD was held with men and women together, as YSC members confirmed that this was how they usually ran their meetings.

Due to logistical constraints, YSC FGDs did not capture all members of the YSC in question.¹³ In some communities, YSC FGDs contained members of more than one YSC.

The field team conducted YSC FGDs and non-YSC FGDs with members of the same community. Doing so allowed the study team to compare YSCs' perceptions of youths' needs in their community with non-YSCs youths' stated requirements, and to capture non-YSC youths' impressions of the YSCs work.

Analysis

Data were gathered in the form of annotated transcripts, including wherever possible participants' statements verbatim. Audio recordings were not possible due to protection concerns and to promote more open conversation. Findings were analyzed using a two-stage coding process in the qualitative software Dedoose. First, predetermined codes were applied to test preexisting hypotheses of the issues youth face (deductive codes). The findings of the first round were then analyzed and used to develop a second set of codes based on patterns generated by the data set itself (inductive codes).

Research Limitations

Qualitative methods and generalizations. The methodology for the issues studied here are common techniques for qualitative data collection. As the sample size covers only two provinces of Afghanistan and participants were not selected randomly, the data is not representative of all Afghan youth or even of all youth within the two provinces. Third-party literature and available statistical data help to contextualize and limit the findings of the qualitative study.

Evaluation of the YSCs. The study assesses the capacity, limitations, and interests of the YSCs. A full assessment of individual YSCs' activities, including the effectiveness of projects they rolled out, was not possible beyond self-reporting by YSC members and validation by non-YSC members and key informants. The study did not assess the additional institutional factors on which YSCs rely for support and capacity, including the CDCs in their communities or the FPs.

Evaluation of service delivery context. Before entering each field-site, the research team ran a high-level desk-study of available education facilities and youth programs in each location (as provided by the government, NGOs, or other organizations). This desk-study was limited to education and employment opportunities only and is not comprehensive. Interview data gives insight into youths' perceptions and

¹⁰ This separation sought to mitigate the possibility of younger youth self-censoring their responses, when in the presence of older persons from their communities.

¹¹ In the case of participants aged 15-17, informed oral consent was also obtained by their guardians.

¹² As part of the establishment of CDCs under the CCNPP, communities conduct a ‘well-being analysis’ in which households are ranked according to wealth, which is retained by the CDC. This is a perceptions-based analysis of relative economic standing within the community, that does not use comparable measures of income or poverty.

¹³ According to the CCNPP operating and training manuals, YSCs are to comprise eight elected members where men and women meet separately and four members where men and women meet together. Aside from official members, YSCs can also include lay members who are active in the YSCs.

knowledge of these opportunities but does not provide an evaluation of individual programs or the service delivery context.

Bias. Self-reported data can give rise to bias, and especially in focus group settings where participants may not feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics. YSC FGD data is at risk of bias, due to potential concerns that answers could affect their funding and

assistance for future projects, or that the field team would share answers with the CDC. To mitigate these risks, confidentiality was stressed and the research purpose of the study made explicit. Case studies were used to de-bias some of the FGD data, particularly on sensitive topics such as ethnicity. Triangulation of data between YSC FGDs, non-YSC FGDs, CS, and interviews with SOs and KIIs helped to identify and limit some of these biases.

1. Youth in their Social and Economic Context

1.1 Economic Standing of Household

“There are different kinds [of youth] in the community - both with good economy and bad economy. Those who have good economy, they don’t have any problems but those who have bad economy, they are faced with too many difficulties.”

Woman, 29, housewife, Jalalabad, Nangarhar

“The barriers for youths are poverty and poor economy, which means they cannot reach their aspirations. But this is only for youths who have poor economy.”

Man, 19, unemployed, Karukh, Herat

As well as being a source of daily hardship, youth described poor economic standing of the family as a major barrier to their aspirations. In interviews, youth linked the poor economic standing of their households to a range of physical hardships, including poor housing, overcrowded housing, and an inability to meet medical expenses. They also linked poor economic standing to mental strains, such as anxieties over family debt, daily insecurity over income and welfare of family members, and family conflict. In addition to this, poor and non-poor youth linked the economic standing of family to their ability to partake in education (Section 2), access to employment and business opportunities (such as on account of nepotism and bribes, or lack of seed capital) (Section 3), and, especially for young men, marriage. While interviews would reveal additional barriers to participation across all of these domains, economic standing was a theme throughout.

Accordingly, poverty and wealth emerged as lines of social distinction in the minds of youth, within communities and between urban and rural areas. The fact that both poor and non-poor youth shared aspirations for economic improvement points to broader desire for upward economic mobility and opportunity among youth, which extends beyond an absence of poverty. Interviews did not ask participants to compare the economic standing of their families to others in their communities. Nevertheless, youth across locations volunteered this information, describing whether ‘economy’ of their household was ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Perceptions of socioeconomic disadvantage have been shown to deteriorate social networks (Trani and Bakshi 2013). One woman, 22, from Herat described the effects of

this social comparison: “Youth think about small things, as they see a youth who has good economic situation gets nervous and says that I wish that I had the same happy life.”

Economic insecurity had clearly taken a negative emotional toll on some participants in this study.

Faced with multiple barriers to improve their situation, some youth expressed feelings of hopelessness and despair. Among existing studies, there is agreement that mental health outcomes are low in Afghanistan. However, the reasons for this extend beyond economic factors to exposure to conflict, social trauma, displacement, and lack of adequate support services (Conseil Santé and Governance Institute of Afghanistan 2018; Sayed 2011). Further, it is not always the case that the poorest have worse mental health outcomes, suggesting the importance of looking at other factors affecting mental health (see Box 1). However, poor mental health outcomes can have economic costs for individuals and communities (Bloom, Chen, and McGovern 2018). Youth are also less likely to seize opportunities where they feel ‘hopeless’ about the future (Duflo 2012).

1.2 Social Ties and Position

1.2.1 With Family and Community

“Every youth has aspirations. The ground is not paved, but we should try our best. One of my dreams is to study and serve my family and community.”

Woman, 20, tailor, Zende Jan, Herat

“We take permission from our parents about our future plans and we follow their instructions. If they don’t allow us, then we don’t do that work because paradise is under the feet of parents.”

Boy, 17, part-time farmer, Kuz Kunar, Nangarhar

A theme in youths' aspirations was their desire to be of value to their families and to honor social expectations.

Across different household constellations, participants described their future aspirations—economic, educational, personal—in terms of assisting family or making them proud; even if they at times referenced only a few ‘key’ people within their nuclear family (parents, siblings). This confirms other studies of psychosocial health in

Afghanistan, which show strong cultures of familial obligation within Afghanistan, the fulfilment of which can help build resilience and self-esteem (Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010). Obligations toward family were often understood in very gendered terms, as seen in how young men and women differently articulated job aspirations (see Section 2.2).

The family emerged as their primary forum of decision making, wielding significant power to either block or allow youth's activities. Studies of the family in Afghanistan have repeatedly stressed the economic and political interdependency of families (Dupree 2004). In rural areas, family allegiances are an ordering factor in land entitlements and management. The honor of the family can be an essential bargaining chip in marriage as well as political and economic ties (Tapper 1981). This ordering power of family restricts individuals' abilities to act in contravention of family and also leaves those without family networks vulnerable as they lack the financial or moral resources. Youth can be particularly vulnerable in this regard, as they have not achieved the moral and financial capital to exert influence on their networks or to act independently of them. It is perhaps not surprising that interviewees repeatedly raised the importance of 'family support' and 'family permission' in achieving their dreams. **Youth shared a number of strategies through which they sought to influence the family decision making process.** Some youth, for example, shared that as an initial course of action, they would consult with their mothers. A 16-year-old boy from Herat City, who was a casual worker, shared how he balanced his respect for his father with what were sometimes their differences of opinions. He shared, "I always ask the permission of my father about my

goals, because he is older and has more experience and has rights on me. If he doesn't allow me, I accept this too. Sometimes, I convince my father with the help of my mother and other relatives."

1.2.2 Marriage

"For the future, I would like to have my own shop in this area, so that I could serve my people and my family. Later, I would like to get married so I will have an equal life to others."

Boy, 17, part-time farmer, Kuz Kunar, Nangarhar

"The biggest of my dreams is to marry an educated person in a very good family so I have a happy life ahead."

Woman, 18, homemaker (unmarried), Zende Jan, Herat

For youth, marriage can be an important strategy of expanding social ties and social position. Accordingly, unmarried young men and women raised it as an aspiration. The chances of never marrying in Afghanistan are low; according to the ALCS, less than one percent of Afghan men and women remain unmarried above the age of forty (ALCS 2017). Both unmarried men and women interviewed in this study looked forward to marriage and spoke of it in terms of the positive changes they hoped marriage could bring. Men's aspirations for marriage were regularly teamed with goals for self-sufficiency, autonomy, and (as the young man's statement above shows) to attain social inclusion among peers. Young women additionally looked to marriage as a pathway to upward economic and social mobility. They spoke about 'good' marriages with reference to the spouse's financial position and other factors such as education levels, which youth

Box 1: Recent Literature on the Link between Social Networks, Resilience and Mental Health

Conflict, poverty, and insecurity have negatively affected mental health outcomes in Afghanistan, although this is an area in which more research is needed (Sayed 2011). Poverty, for example, is commonly understood to result in poor mental health outcomes, but the correlation is not direct—in some countries, poor people show better mental health outcomes than the non-poor (Das et al. 2007).

One noted pathway through which people deal with trauma and hardship is through the strength of their social networks. Good relationships can build resilience under the right circumstances (Kawachi and Berkman 2001). Studies in Afghanistan have noted the importance of social networks to mental health. Feeling valued and at one with one's community can help overcome some of the negative impacts of trauma and hardship—and can sometimes have a more significant effect on feelings of well-being (Trani and Bakhshi 2013). But with these networks also come high levels of social obligation, which can be a source of strain in times of hardship. Pressures on youth to provide for and honor their families is one such stressor (Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010).

seemed to value highly (see Section 3). Young women were also sensitive to the education levels and temperament of the household. New brides often occupy a lower power position in the homes of their in-laws, in relation to women and men, which can leave them vulnerable to mistreatment. According to the 2015 Demographic and Health Survey, 53 percent of Afghan women have experienced physical or sexual violence at least once in their lives.

Marriage, under the right circumstances, was also presented as a pathway to greater freedom by young women. This belief is reflective of the greater restrictions placed on unmarried young women, especially in attempts to preserve chastity. A 19-year-old woman from Zende Jan in Herat, for example, viewed marriage as her only way out of her parent's refusal to let her study: "I can only achieve my goals when I marry, that time I may have more financial support and freedom of choice and permissions." A number of married women in the study did indeed share that they were afforded more freedoms to work and study once they married. For most Afghan women, however, marriage marks the beginning of full-time domestic work and child-rearing. There is also little guarantee that marriage will result in an improvement of women and girls' living conditions. Indeed, the aspiration shared by young women that their future spouses and in-laws would afford them more freedoms is itself reflective of how little the matter was in their control, before and after marriage.

The negative impacts of forced and early marriage on women and girls in particular were noted across study locations. Among women ages 20–24, 35 percent are married by age 18. Early marriage and child-rearing have a negative impact on young women's abilities to participate in work and education. Bride price, financial burdens of maintaining daughters, and stigmas associated with 'unmarried' women can incentivize families for reasons that do not necessarily take into account the full interests of the woman concerned (Hunte 2006; World Bank 2013a). There is significant diversity in marriage practices across Afghanistan, by location and ethnicity, which can affect the agency that young women have in entering marriage (Smith 2009; Tapper 1981; Berrenberg 2003). In Nangarhar, youth mentioned the practice of '*baad*', which is the giving of a girl in marriage to settle a serious dispute or a crime between families. They also mentioned '*badal*'—the 'exchanging' of women between families, which can

have the advantage of canceling-out marriage expenses between families. *Baad* is explicitly criminalized under Afghan law, as is forced marriage generally.¹⁴ Their continuance points to the need to improve protections available in the prevention, reporting, and resolution of violence against women (UNAMA 2018).

Youth linked the economic standing of the family to marriage prospects. Economic standing is, however linked to the terms and timing of marriage. In interviews, youth cited the inability to pay bride price or wedding costs as narrowing or even extinguishing marriage options for men. Comments by both men and women revealed the emotional impacts of this problem on young men. Anecdotal evidence from other studies suggests a link between household poverty and the forced or early marriage of women and girls (Smith 2009; World Bank 2013a). Some interviewees did indeed indicate that poverty could incentivize the early marriage of girls, as families needed to unburden themselves. However, as economic incentives for marrying girls early can persist regardless of poverty, and given the range of other motives for marrying girls—including honoring of family commitments—the effect of poverty in this regard is difficult to establish definitively.

1.3 Gender Norms

"There are differences between the challenges faced by men and women in our community. Women cannot go out of home easily like men and find a job, because community criticizes them, and they don't have the family permission. Men have a better condition."

Boy, 16, school student, Zende Jan, Herat

"If I go to school, then people will make fun of us."

Girl, 16, homemaker (engaged), Dara-i-Nur, Nangarhar

Strongly articulated gender norms continue to shape young Afghans' aspirations as well as the expectations placed on them. The category of gender can intersect with that of youth in specific ways, as youth are expected to spend their time growing into their gender roles (Boudet et al. 2012; Schlegel 1995). Gender norms can be internalized and willingly followed by men and women, and contribute to feelings of well-being (Trani, Bakhshi, and Rolland 2011). They can also be enforced by others, such as restrict permissions to take up specific opportunities. Gender norms are not uniform across Afghanistan,

¹⁴ See Article 5 EAW Law 2009.

and there is diversity by location (SIDA 2009). Studies of gender norms in Afghanistan show the prevalence of the belief that women are responsible for managing the home while men act as breadwinners, and women commonly report that gender norms restrict their mobility, employment choices, control over assets, and ability to participate in politics (Echavez 2012; Schütte 2014; World Bank 2013a). These beliefs are borne out in lower education and employment levels for young women over men.

A persistent barrier to women's inclusion in work, education, or other domains is their families' fear of 'shame'. Fear of judgement is distinguishable from family objection to the idea of women pursuing work or education. In this study, restrictions on women's mobility were most robust in rural Nangarhar and Herat, and Nangarhar overall. In societies where the honor of the family is vital to social survival, as in Afghanistan, the shame of one family member can quickly diminish the social capital of the entire family. Preservation of honor can have disproportionate effects on women, as male (and by extension, family) honor is premised on men's ability to shelter and provide for women (Kandiyoti 1988). The mobility of unmarried women and girls can be all the more controlled, given the importance of maintaining the image of chastity for marriage. Interviews conducted in this study suggested that shame and fear of social sanction act as powerful deterrents to parents who might otherwise permit their daughters to pursue opportunities in employment and education. Interventions designed to empower women must thus not only seek to show families the value of women's work and education (which some already do) but also diminish the social costs associated with them at the community level.

Young men emerged as potential allies, but also bad actors, in enabling women's mobility out of the home. Women spoke about harassment and taunts by young men, which could not only be tiring on women but also put women physically and socially at risk. A 16-year-old girl from a neighboring area in Herat City stated that, "There are so many harassments outdoors. All these things lead families not to let the women work and study outside." Pockets of young men in all locations visited, however, shared sympathy toward the fewer permissions afforded to women. In urban and rural Nangarhar, where women's mobility was most restricted, male YSC members were actively engaged in campaigning for a reduction in the harassment of women who wanted to go to school. Accounts such as these raise the question of

whether restrictions on women's mobility could change organically over time in certain areas, or if intergenerational engagement could accelerate the normalization of women's movements.

Box 2: How Gender Norms Might Change from Within Culture: Example from Saudi Arabia

A recent study from Saudi Arabia analyzed men's attitudes toward female labor force participation (FLFP). In Saudi Arabia, women are by law required to gain permission from their husbands to work, and the FLFP is very low. A survey run by the study found that most young married men in Saudi Arabia privately support FLFP, as did their neighbors. However, they believed that other men would judge their decision to allow their wives to work. As men did not speak about their support for FLFP openly, they did not know that other men supported their wives to work too. The study then ran an experiment. It let the men in the study know that other men in their social setting also supported FLFP. After four months, wives of men whose views had been 'corrected' were more likely to have applied for jobs outside of the home.

Source: Bursztyn, González, and Yanagizawa-Drott 2018.

1.4 Location (Rural Youth)

"One of our biggest challenges is unavailability of hospital and the roads are not asphalted either. Another challenge is long distant ways from home to school as well as to the city. It is very difficult to visit the city because it's too far from our locality."

Girl, 16, school student, Karukh, Herat

There is a vast urban/rural divide in Afghanistan in access to essential services like healthcare and education. Fiscal constraints and an ongoing context of fragility have impeded the rollout of services and infrastructure to large parts of rural Afghanistan. Despite significant advances in the expansion of education, not all rural communities have secondary schools or spaces, especially for girls (World Bank 2019a). Healthcare is another area in which services are limited. The high prevalence of early marriage and childbearing, combined with women's limited access to medical facilities, contributes to fatalities among young mothers (Samuel Hall 2013). Where healthcare facilities are available in rural areas, they often lack gendered waiting rooms, do not have an adequate number of female healthcare workers (WHO 2013). In 2016, only 53 percent of rural clinics in Afghanistan had a female physician (UNFPA 2016).

While urban youth in this study usually blamed

lack of opportunities for youth as a national issue, rural youth often raised the problem as specific to, or at least exacerbated in, their rural communities. Inadequate or absent infrastructure services were regularly mentioned as a challenge by rural or semi-rural youth in this study, as well as inadequate education opportunities and lack of roads, which could limit opportunities to travel further afield for work. The fact that rural youth were sensitive to this disparity in opportunities points to a more significant issue—that they perceived a disadvantage relative to their urban cohorts.

Box 3: Youth’s Views: Development and Conflict

The challenging security situation in Afghanistan was foremost in the minds of participants in this study in both Herat and Nangarhar. Urban and rural youth mentioned conflict and insecurity as a way to reflect on the broader issue of Afghanistan’s slow economic growth and the state of their country. In this vein, one young man from Kuz Kunar, Nangarhar, linked the many issues faced by youth back to ongoing conflict. He shared, “youth have too many problems, such as illiteracy, migration and drug addiction, personal hostilities - these problems have passed down in heritage because Afghanistan is suffering from 40 years of war.” Another man in the same focus group agreed, adding, “peace is really important for development and education, and to get us to our dreams.”

In Herat City, an improved security situation was cited as something that had greatly improved the prospects of younger generations. A female university student in Herat claimed, “[Older people] have grown up in times of war and instability and thus they couldn’t progress. But now the youth can travel, get an education and freely study.”

1.5 Vulnerable Youth

“We are originally from Kunar province, and then we migrated to Pakistan, and then from Pakistan to here...I want to go back to my place of origin. No one knows our language here, and they make fun of our clothes and everything.”

Woman, 23, IDP/returnee (unemployed), Jalalabad, Nangarhar

“There are some other youths whose problems are different, for instance disability. My leg is disabled, and they don’t hire disabled persons. They say ‘you are disabled and don’t have the ability to work’.”

Man, 20, unemployed, Karukh, Herat

When asked to identify the most vulnerable youth in their community, youth overwhelmingly chose categories that mapped onto poor economic

standing and lack of social ties. This observation underscores the perceived importance of economic standing and social connections in getting by in Afghanistan. The categories identified were returnees, IDPs, orphans, widows, ethnic minorities, and drug dependent youth. All of these groups are indeed regularly cited as disadvantaged in the literature on exclusion and vulnerability in Afghanistan; and are disadvantaged in their access to markets, services, and participation in the public sphere (World Bank 2019b).

IDPs and returnees are a vulnerable to social and economic marginalization and are a population in which youth and children are overrepresented. Due to the ongoing armed conflict and natural disasters, IDPs are a large and growing population in Afghanistan. Further, roughly 2.4 million displaced Afghans have returned to Afghanistan since 2014, with the highest returns occurring in 2016 and 2017 (World Bank 2019b). The displaced population trails others on many key humanitarian and development indicators such as access to food, quality housing, education, land, property, and jobs (Amnesty International 2016; Macdonald 2011; World Bank 2019b).

Youth with disabilities are also more likely to face discrimination, and miss out on entry into the job market. Poor healthcare and war have contributed to high levels of disability in Afghanistan. Estimates suggest that 4.7 percent of the population has a disability (SIDA 2014). Interviewees singled out youth affected by disabilities as a subset who faced significantly more challenges than other young people in joining the workforce and accessing education. Some interviewees were also parents of children with disabilities. One young female respondent shared, “my elder is disabled, and he also has psychological problems...we borrowed a huge amount of money for his treatment and now we are faced with so many problems.”

Finally, young women who are widows, and children who have lost fathers can suffer not only as a result of economic disadvantage but a loss of social status within the household. Death of heads of households or husbands could also result in reconfiguration of living situations, which could adversely affect youth. One young unmarried woman who had been living with her brother described how, following his death in war, her living situation had become ‘extremely difficult’ as she was left living with his wives. Youth in Nangarhar cited the custom of

widows marrying the relatives of their husbands, sometimes as second

wives, and the potentially damaging emotional effects of this on both the women concerned, and their children.

PART I: PATHWAYS TO YOUTH INCLUSION

2. Employment

2.1 Overview of Youth Economic Inclusion

Youth are underrepresented in the labor market.

The position of youth in the labor market has deteriorated in the past five years. Most youth are either inactive (48 percent) or unemployed (14 percent). Altogether, youth account for 38 percent of the labor force participants in Afghanistan, despite making up a majority share of the population. Of youth that do work, only 18 percent are in secure salaried jobs. The largest share of working youth is self-employed (35 percent), day laborers (18 percent), and unpaid family workers (29 percent). This work tends to be vulnerable, short-term, labor-intensive, and physically demanding.¹⁵ A substantial share of working youth is underemployed.¹⁶

Rural youth are more likely to be employed than urban youth, but they are also more likely to be underemployed and in vulnerable forms of work.

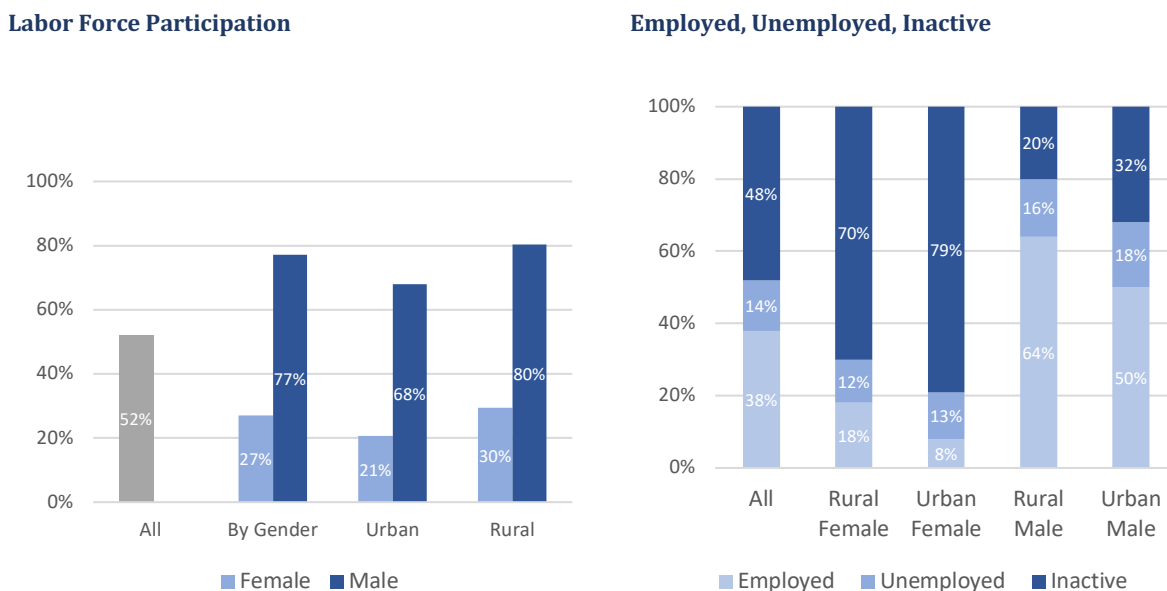
In rural areas, employed youth are most likely to be employed in agriculture (as compared to the service

sector in urban areas). There is a blurred boundary between stable income-generating employment and unpaid family work within agriculture, and the work is subject to the inherent cyclicity of agricultural production. Both male and female youth migrate to cities for employment and move into the service sector. When comparing the two most recent ALCS, the service sector has seen an influx of youth employees. The data also show a non-alignment between the growing population of youth coming to cities and the creation of jobs in the urban labor market.

Youth unemployment and underemployment are higher for women in general.

The female employment rate is four times lower than the male employment rate (60 percent versus 15 percent). Young women's labor force participation rate is nearly three times lower than their male counterparts (27 percent versus 77 percent). This gap persists at the urban/rural levels, with 68 percent urban young men versus 21 percent urban young women and 80 percent rural young men versus 30 percent rural young women in

Figure 2: Youth Labor Force Participation and Employment



Source: ALCS 2016–2017, adjusted by authors for the age range 15–29.

¹⁵ Both adults and youth are involved in vulnerable work in similar proportions, although youth are more likely to be unemployed and inactive than the rest of the adult population.

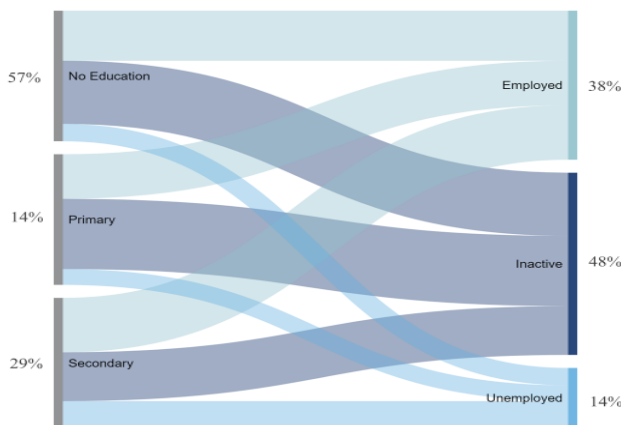
¹⁶ All persons ages 14 and above who, during the reference period of one week, were (a) working less than 40 hours, (b) available to work additional hours, and (c) willing to work additional hours (CSO 2018).

the labor force. Young women are even less likely than men to be engaged in paid salary work and more likely to engage in vulnerable and precarious forms of work. They are involved in unpaid family work (65 percent). Another 23 percent of young women are self-employed, 10 percent are employed in salaried work, and 2 percent work as day laborers.

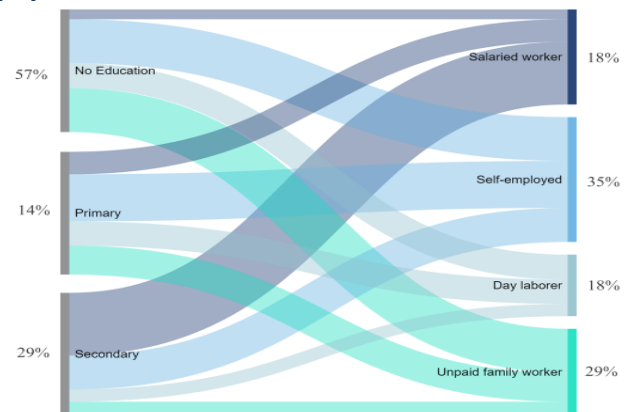
Education does not predict whether youth will participate in the labor market. However, it does predict the type of work youth will do. Youth at all levels of educational attainment experience approximately the same employment status. However, a young person's education level strongly predicts the type of employment they do. Salaried employment is almost entirely limited to those who have completed secondary education. However, the data show that inactivity among youth increases with their education background, meaning more educated youth are in inactive status.

Figure 3: Labor Force Participation and Education

School to Work Transition of Youth



Transition from Education to Different Types of Employment



Source: ALCS 2016–2017, adjusted by authors for the age range 15–29.

2.2 Social Impacts of Youth Unemployment

“Youths are jobless; they suffer from not having money. They are being humiliated by their families too. So, they are vulnerable to becoming drug addicted, they can be tempted to do robbery.”

Man, 29, unemployed, Herat City, Herat

“Youth due to this unemployment get disturbed. There is a saying, ‘when you get disturbed, you get to fight’”

Man, 21, university student, Dara-i-Nur, Nangarhar

Of all the challenges faced by youth, interviewees raised unemployment as the most pressing. However they were usually referencing 'male unemployment.' For example, despite citing unemployment as a major problem for youth in their communities, and sharing hopes that their brothers could secure better employment, several young women shared no plans or aspirations to work. Gender norms might explain why male youth unemployment was viewed as such a pressing issue, as many young men sought or were expected to grow into or fulfill breadwinner roles.

Young men described stigma and feelings of failure as a result of their unemployment,

sometimes reinforced by family. Aside from being linked to economic hardship, male unemployment had emotional costs on men and their families on account of intergenerational tensions and frustrations among young men. In one focus group in Herat, young men ages between 18 and 29 discussed the wide-ranging impacts of unemployment on young men. One participant, himself unemployed, suggested that specialist psychological services be made available to youth who were grappling with the effects of unemployment. There were reports of fights within families over parents wanting their children to try harder to secure work, with interviewees suggesting a generational mismatch in understanding the difficulties of obtaining employment. Youth are indeed overrepresented in the unemployed population: 45.5 percent of the unemployed population are in ages 15–24, and youth below the age of 25 have lower employment levels than those ages 25–35.

Across all locations, youth linked male unemployment to narcotic use among young men, affecting security in the community. In all six districts visited, youth discussed drug abuse as both a result and cause of unemployment and a driver of social exclusion. One 17-year-old man from Herat City shared, "Drug addicts are a specific group of youth who face different challenges than others. Families and communities do not treat them well and beat them." The assumption underlying the majority of responses was that addiction was an issue specific to young men. Rates of drug use in Afghanistan have likely increased but still remain comparatively average compared to other countries (Conseil Santé and Governance Institute of Afghanistan 2018). The fact that youth regularly linked drug addiction to unemployment might say less about actual rates of addiction than widespread concern over the dire effects of joblessness on young men.

Youth also drew on the issue of male unemployment, to explain cycles of violent conflict in Afghanistan. In Nangarhar, men in the rural and urban areas made references to the links between youth unemployment and the young men joining anti-government elements. In Afghanistan, the inability to access social and economic spaces, even among the economically secure, has been cited as one reason for youth to turn to violence and extremist ideologies (Ahmadi 2015; Fazli, Johnson, and Cooke 2015). However, the relationship between unemployment and youths' inclination to engage in conflict is not necessarily direct. Perceptions of social

injustice can also be a motivating factor (see Section 4).

For young women, frustration at economic standing did not always translate into plans for work. Marital status and plans for marriage should be taken into account here. Most women who stayed silent on work were already married and may have already adjusted to their roles as full-time homemakers. In Afghanistan, the mean age of marriage for women is 18, with figures lower for women in rural areas. Almost half of the youth interviewed, who were over the age of 18, were either married or engaged. However, this silence existed among unmarried women too. For example, one young woman from Jalalabad shared that she hoped for the 'salary' of her father to increase as the family was 'down on loans'. With regard to her plans, she shared, "I want to be married, and do the chores of my house until I am at home." Such comments point to internalized gender norms, specifically an identification of some women with their roles as homemakers.

A significant number of unemployed youths described job preferences in terms of serving the community or the recognition that the job would bring. The jobs that youth identified as 'doing good' in the community included those that brought status while meeting the basic needs of people, such as a doctor, psychologist, or teacher. However, helping the community was also mentioned with regard to other professions, such as being a shopkeeper, mechanic, or working in cell-phone repair. While servicing community was raised almost exclusively with regard to career plans that were beneficial to the interviewee too, the prevalence of comments around service suggest the presence of ethical take on the importance of being a contributing member of society, and also a desire to be valued. One young woman, engaged in tailoring in Jalalabad, described how her job made her feel more 'included' in this way: "I myself feel included in this community because I am a very famous tailor and everyone in this community knows me if they are rich or poor – they bring their clothes to me..."

2.3 Information and Problems of Access

"Youth who are uneducated have a bad condition...if they are educated, they still have no jobs. Look at my brothers, some of them have completed engineering, and some have

done other kinds of education, but no one recruits them. No bribe, no job."

Woman, 20, homemaker (unmarried), Kuz Kunar, Nangarhar

With prospects for stable employment low, many youths expressed the views that 'middlemen', 'contacts', and 'family supporters' were required to access opportunities. While bribes too were mentioned, youth's commentaries converged around a broader point—that access to good jobs correlates with having a well-connected family. Lack of 'access' by way of connections was articulated quite forcefully in the case of educated youth, who hoped to obtain public sector or office jobs. A young man from Jalalabad District 9 commented that "our main problem is that our youth have studied at universities and have degrees, but they are still unemployed, as they don't have any middleman to gain a position somewhere with their help." However, less-educated youth and those in the rural areas too lamented the need for connections. It is perhaps because of this perception that youth spoke most positively about programs that opened up opportunities for *all* in their communities.

The current data support the hypothesis that youth rely heavily on their social networks to receive information about jobs or work opportunities. It is not clear that youth were engaged in job-search activities outside of their social networks, or at all. The data set contains negligible mention of youth going out and applying for jobs. There was also no mention of accessing online platforms to find jobs or other opportunities. Reviewing job-search behavior was not a specific focus of the study instruments, and this is an area in which more research could be conducted. However, given how strongly youth felt about lack of available job opportunities, one might have expected more mention of (unsuccessful) job search activities. There are few functioning public or private employment service (PES) in Afghanistan. They are limited to high-skilled jobs and jobs in the government sector and geared toward the urban areas. These platforms were not mentioned by youth.

Accounts by rural youth, about not having 'heard' about training and work programs before it was 'too late' raised questions about how providers disseminate information about these programs. Spaces for short-term work programs and training offered by government and NGOs are usually limited (see below). By some accounts, youth were too late at signing up. The study did, however, encounter

perceptions that possessing the right 'connections' were necessary to receive information about and access to these opportunities. One young man in a rural area gave a rather scathing view of how access is managed in his community: "When an organization/foundation provide some opportunities in the community, only a limited number of powerful people benefit from them. The young people are deprived of such programs." This raises questions about how outside actors go about disseminating information about opportunities and the local mediators that are chosen to distribute such information. Of concern were perceptions that this applied to opportunities provided by the government too, affecting trust in institutions overall.

2.4 Opportunities for Work

2.4.1 Employment

"The government has to build a factory for youth to benefit from. Most of the people are farming, and only 5 out of 100 people have access to business."

Man, 28, casual worker, Kuz Kunar, Nangarhar

"Women face challenges mostly in finding a job in a good working environment. Women can't work in their desired field as they are not allowed by their families as well as the working environment is not good for them."

Woman, 21, university student, Herat City, Herat

Unstable, precarious work had taken a toll on young men in this study. In line with the national figures provided above, the majority of male participants classed themselves as either unemployed, part-time, or casual workers (day laborers). A young man from Herat shows how casual work is both not full time, and hard: "I am a casual worker and laboring from dawn to dusk... I work 10 days in a month." In the rural areas, youth also spoke about 'helping' family in agriculture—an activity which is typically unpaid but which may contribute to the household economy. Youth who worked part time included students who had to supplement their studies with work.

Young men, especially in the rural areas, said they would like to see factories constructed in their areas, revealing the underlying desire for stable longer-term employment. In one village in Dara-i-Nur, youth spoke with some nostalgia about a factory that had previously existed in the area: "There was a factory in this area, which I was working with and had 10,000 Pakistani rupees income monthly. The factory

was producing chips, but now it's closed because of lacking electricity; therefore, most of the youth are unemployed." Young men from that area said they wanted another factory, or a 'poultry farm' be set up to create job opportunities again. Youth in Herat, Karukh and Jalalabad also all proposed factories to be set up to provide jobs to youth. These suggestions reveal underlying desires for stable and reliable work. With less than 10 percent of Afghans employed in manufacturing, and economic growth still slow, prospects for immediate change are low. Underlying the above comments were desires for more sustainable employment options among rural youth.

In the rural areas, interviewees spoke favorably of infrastructure and construction projects in their area, which brought short-term employment.

Youth cited the twofold benefit of these programs: jobs and improvement of the community. Infrastructure, of course, brings many welfare benefits aside from jobs. Youth in the most rural communities cite the need for clean drinking water, electricity, school buildings, roads, and proper sewage. One young woman in Dara-i-Nur, Nangarhar described how the Citizen's Charter program had had this positive impact on their lives. "CCNPP built roads and dams for us, and dug wells that eased our lives. Youth participate in these programs because they work, earn money and solve their problems." A young man (18–29) from Dara-i-Nur, Nangarhar, also gave this example of a canal project led by a local NGO active in their community, "There was a canal construction project that all of the youth were busy in. They were constructing a canal in our community ... Youth were busy in and built retaining walls for the canal near to the river." Youth viewed better infrastructure as a positive outcome of these activities, which could also positively affect livelihoods (better irrigation for agriculture, electricity).

The problem was, these projects were short term, always ended, and were always limited in space. They also did not seem to carve out spaces for younger youth, ages 25 or lower. Programs that provide income opportunities to one person per family— such as in the case of the Maintenance Cash and Construction Grant (MCCG)—may do much to bolster household income. If only one person can participate in a program, then the net effect on household income might be the same regardless of who the family selects into the program. With capacity

for projects limited, it is not clear that families would nominate younger youth. Comments by interviewees suggest family consultation in selecting youth into these programs and, following seniority, elder brothers and breadwinners might have privileged access to them. In any case, a major complaint among youth was that space was limited.

Comparable short-term employment opportunities are lacking for rural women. In both rural and urban areas, 'suitable' work is not always available for women who wish to work.

The student from Herat cited above is one example of a woman willing to work, but who finds herself unable to due to lack of options that both she and her parents find acceptable for women. Given variances in attitudes toward women's work, education, and mobility, suitable types of women's work outside of the home would need to be explored further at the community level. In some locations, women-only spaces, like tailoring workshops, were viewed as appropriate for women to congregate and work. In Nangarhar, the view that women could not work outside the home at all was strongly articulated by men and by women. Exploring ways to diminish the shame attached to women's mobility outside the home or, that failing, expanding opportunities for employment opportunities within the home might be a solution for these women.

Working as a teacher emerged as an alternative option for educated, unemployed male youth. Educated young women, on the other hand, were more likely to approach teaching as a first-choice option, in both urban and rural areas.

There is anecdotal evidence that Afghans view teaching as an undesirable career path (World Bank 2019a). This might be the case for educated youth who become teachers for lack of other options, especially those that take up 'informal' teaching positions. In interviews, young women stood out as approaching the teaching profession far more enthusiastically and intentionally than young men. A girl of 16 in Dara-i-Nur shared of her plans to train as a professional teacher, "I will serve my people and I will rescue myself and others from illiteracy and misery and will guide them to a good way." These aspirations could be read against the high value placed on education by youth. Specifically concerning women's employment, teaching might be a space more consistent with the practice of appropriate gender norms, in so far as it takes place in women-only spaces.

Box 4: Unemployment and Youth Migration

Very few youth in this study volunteered that they wished to migrate abroad. Mainly, respondents shared negative opinions about the difficulties migrants face en route and in their migration destinations. Their very negative impressions of life in Pakistan and Iran, might have been influenced by high returnee flows from both countries since 2014 (World Bank 2019b).

The 2019 Survey of the Afghan People indicated that 39.7 percent of Afghans said they would leave the country if given the opportunity, with figures higher for youth aged 18-25 at 41.9 percent. The most cited reasons for leaving are push factors: insecurity (77.7 percent) followed by unemployment (51.6 percent). In Herat and Nangarhar at least, youth explained youth migration, as a response to economic hardships at home. However, while unemployment might incentivize youth migration, it is not clear that employment reduces migration all things equal. Cross country-data suggests that economic development at home, can actually increase migration flows from low and middle-income countries, where better options are available (Clemens and Postel 2017; Samuel Hall 2018). This could be because development impacts financial capabilities to migrate, and increases aspirations for better living standards (de Haas 2010; Carling and Collins 2017; Dao et al. 2016).

2.4.2 Self-Employment

"I want to fight my economic difficulties in the future and begin a good enough business."

Man, 25, casual worker, Kuz Kunar, Nangarhar

In rural areas, self-employed work was, in practice, insecure and hard. Still, with employment options lacking, many youths looked to either enter self-employment or to engage in better types of self-employment.

Young men in particular shared aspirations to set up a small business or expand family businesses, although plans were usually raised in general terms rather than concrete plans. A perceived benefit of setting up a business was to create 'employment' opportunities for family and social networks. Following the strong family dynamics mentioned in Section 1, some comments also showed the internalized reliance of younger youth (those below 25) on the family for direction and approval. For example, a 19-year-old man from Zende Jan Herat shared his desires to be 'self-employed'. But when probed on what this meant, he added "I don't have any specific plan for future. Since my father is responsible and in charge of me, I have not been faced with making a plan for myself." For those who did have concrete plans, financial and material constraints were cited as the main barriers to this plan.

Participants mentioned various programs that distributed small loans for business ideas that helped grow seed capital. They generally viewed them favorably, though some participants were critical of programs that were too 'strict'. In Dara-i-Nur, Nangarhar, the Afghanistan Rehabilitation and Development Program was lauded by one man as it

had allowed "families to start a business...and provide employment opportunities." Another channel for distributing loans in communities was through the CDC. In two locations, non-YSC youth spoke of how YSCs were engaged in brokering money from 'wealthier' people in the community to distribute loans to people to set up businesses. It is not clear on what terms such loans are provided within the community, to what extent the results are equitable, and if these loans are viewed more favorably by those involved.

Youth seemed very happy with programs that combined training with the distribution of materials for income generation. The data was not able to assess the impact of these programs or the extent to which they generated sustainable self-employment opportunities. Examples were the provision of sewing machines and tailoring to women so they could work from home, provision of livestock and chickens, and provision of materials for farming. One man in Zende Jan, Herat was pleased with a program that had "distributed of silkworm boxes," stating "many people benefited from it and the business of the people has improved with this silkworm boxes. Since it is advantageous to the people they will participate." In the same community, however, there was frustration among women over a tailoring program that distributed sewing machines and some training to women but then had no follow-up.

Tailoring, carpet weaving, and beautician programs were the main types of programs that women seemed to favor, often referencing previous programs in their communities. Women do not always participate in these programs with the hope of engaging in income-generating work. Women shared in some cases that these courses were

desirable because they taught skills that women could apply within the home, and that would mitigate having to pay third parties. Yet another reason why women might favor these programs is that they can be carried out in the confines of a home—thereby overcoming the above concerns of working in women-appropriate spaces. One young woman, although speaking of her mother and not herself, gave this positive account of a program instigated by MRRD. "MRRD has launched a carpet weaving training course for the women. After the training course, they distributed carpet weaving tools and accessories to all the participants. My mother participated in this course and currently she is weaving carpets at home through which she earns a small income."

It is not clear, however, whether women mainly spoke about these programs because they did not favor other types of work or because they had no knowledge of other options. There is a focus among NGOs and other organizations on training courses for women, which have an affinity with household work. It is not clear whether these options are inspiring women through the matter of their supply. The supply of alternative possibilities to women might well stimulate demand for alternatives. To the extent that other credible options are to be made available to women, they would likely need to consider further the matter of gendered spaces, mobility, and home-work commitments mentioned above.

3. Education and Skills Training

3.1 Overview of Youth and Education Outcomes

Youth educational outcomes are improving, but remain low. According to the two most recent ALCS surveys, education attainment and completion rates have improved by 1 to 2 percentage points across all levels of education for both males and females. Still, more than half of all young people in Afghanistan are illiterate, and most young Afghans will not complete secondary school.

The progress that has been made has been uneven. Rural youth and women lag significantly in education indicators. Illiteracy in rural areas is double that of urban areas. Gains in female literacy over the last decades are due to rapid advances in the urban areas, while the illiteracy of rural women has proved harder to tackle. While gender gaps are highest in rural areas, they remain pronounced across Afghanistan. Approximately 72 percent of young women have no education, compared to 43 percent of young men, and young men's completion rates at the higher levels double those of young women (22 percent of men completed upper secondary versus 10 percent of women).

Youth who leave school are not necessarily working. Rates of youth not in employment,

education, or training (NEET) are high in Afghanistan. Currently, 42 percent of people ages 15–24 are NEET and the figures are much higher for women, at 68 percent. Youth who are NEET are particularly at high risk of longer-term exclusion, as they not only miss out on skills development in the workplace or education but risk an erosion of existing skills.

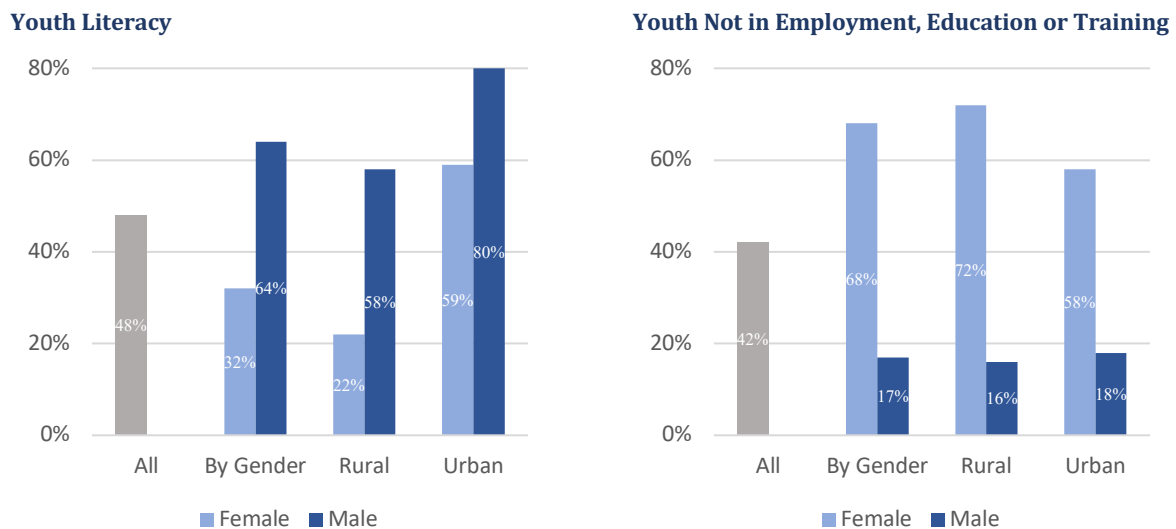
3.2 The Perceived Value of Education

“I think the biggest happiness and opportunity for youth is education. Successful are the ones who have education. People who have education, ended with great jobs.”
Woman, 20, preparing for university, Kuz Kunar, Nangarhar

“I have seen a lot of illiterate people and I know how their future is. Also, I have seen educated people who studied and worked hard, now they have a good life.”
Boy, 15, school student and casual worker, Zende Jan, Herat

Irrespective of their educational backgrounds, across all study locations, youth raised education as the key to improving young people's prospects on the job market. Strikingly, these claims were also made by NEET youth, those who had broken off secondary education or claimed to be completely 'uneducated'. Across these profiles, lack of education was regularly

Figure 4: Literacy and NEET Youth



Source: ALCS 2016–2017, adjusted by authors for the age range 15–29.

blamed as the root cause of poor or no employment, or lack of resources to rise above current circumstances. Their statements reveal, on the one hand, a view that they cannot access education for reasons beyond their control (such as remoteness, poverty, or social barriers). On the other, they also show faith in the transformational power of education. This faith might be generational and a function of new possibilities for learning after decades of it being in short supply.

As well as being valued as a pathway to economic inclusion, education is valued as a pathway to social inclusion and advancement amongst certain youth. The current sample is too small to make a broad generalization on this point. However, it supports existing studies in Afghanistan that youth associate 'being educated' with being forward-looking, enlightened, and worldly (Holland and Yousofi 2014). While such perceptions might be more concentrated among urban and relatively educated youth striving for higher education, interviews found these perceptions reflected in the rural areas too. This statement by a young man in Kuz Kunar, a semi-rural district of Nangarhar, illustrates how this issue may be particular to this generation of Afghanistan's youth: "Elder people grew up when there was no need of education. Therefore, elder people didn't have this problem: if a youth doesn't have education this might be a big source of shame for him."

Accordingly, education levels might affect marriage prospects and other forms of social inclusion. As described further in Section 3, YSC members were selected on the basis of being 'educated' even though this was not strictly a requirement of their membership. Unmarried women, regardless of their educational background or plans, spoke about education as a desirable attribute in a spouse. While this was likely in part due to the perceived link with earning power and status, comments also suggested that an educated spouse would be kinder and more 'worldly', allowing them more freedom. The reverse—men wanting a wife who is educated—was never expressed by men or by women in this study. This attitude cannot be excluded but, to the extent it exists, it is likely more limited. Men and their families insisting on women's education has been observed as a creeping trend elsewhere in Afghanistan (Holland and Yousofi 2014).

More men than women brought up education as one of their aspirations, with this pattern being observed in all locations visited. Women's silence

points to both personal preferences and social constraints. Women who remained silent on the prospect of education tended to be either married or still living at home and attending to housework. They may not even have considered education a priority. At the same time, some married women conveyed the view that they were 'beyond' learning and regretted that they had been required to forgo education by families. One key informant in Jalalabad, Nangarhar, who was active in promoting women's education, shared: "Our female youth face more challenges than male youth as they remained out of school...Some got engaged, some married, and some got old and think it too late."

3.3 Social Barriers to Education

"I have studied till sixth grade, then my family members didn't allow me to study more; they think it is shame and do not let girls to go to school. I really liked to go to school and I begged them a lot, but they said that no female in Dara-i-Nur goes to school."

Woman, 23, homemaker (unmarried), Dara-i-Nur, Nangarhar

Gender norms and poverty dominate reasons why youth leave school and do not continue with their education. This was apparent from interviews and is consistent with other survey data from across Afghanistan (World Bank 2019a). The unavailability of appropriate teaching settings, teaching materials, and trained teachers contribute to low education outcomes in Afghanistan, at a time when government investment in education is decreasing (World Bank 2019a). Key informants in rural locations shared various concerns about the quality of education and described attempts (some successful) to petition the government. However, the need to work for young men and lack of family support for young women seemed to be the most fundamental barriers, with these barriers beginning at the primary level. From interviews, it appeared that youths' sense of obligation to support their family in times of hardship could be just as much a reason to drop out as parental direction.

The availability of appropriate teaching spaces, as well as female teachers, is a problem that compounds cultural barriers to women's secondary education. Half of the schools in Afghanistan do not have buildings and more than 40 percent do not have supporting boundary walls, which can be an issue for security, especially for girls (World Bank 2019). In rural and semi-rural areas,

girls mentioned a lack of formal teaching. In Zende Jan, Herat, one 15-year-old girl shared her frustration that there was no formal schooling for girls in her area and that which was available was poor. "We yet want our secondary school to be changed into high school. Our school has a very small area and we study under tents which cause different diseases but have no health facilities."

Of note in this study, were the women and girls across locations who desired to pursue education, but whose families prevented them from doing so. As is the case in many areas of Afghanistan, young women shared that their parents allowed them to study up to an extent only, with puberty presenting a strict cutoff point. Shame at the prospect of women's education and diminishing marriage options seemed to be a significant motivator, especially in Nangarhar. This situation appeared to have devastating emotional effects for some of the women in this study. One woman, who had been made to leave school age 13 to marry, stated at age 22, "the dream for education still makes me cry. But there is no way now." Family support to pursue education was, for men and women, viewed as essential. Judging from interviews with youth and key informants, support for women's education varied significantly across locations and was not uniform within locations. This underscores the importance of advocating for education at the community and family level. Some young women had taken this upon themselves. One 18-year-old woman in Dara-i-Nur Nangarhar, who had been orphaned and was living with her uncle, shared this aspiration: "For the next years, I want to satisfy my uncle to let me attend school to complete my education and to have a good life."

Interviews also suggested intergenerational tensions over how families chose to invest or sacrifice money for the sake of education. The pursuit of education was an area in which this study registered the most intergenerational conflict. In Afghanistan, education is free and guaranteed up to the university level. The private education sector is small, making up 2 percent of general education. Notwithstanding, full-time education can also present an opportunity cost in terms of earning. Controlling for gender differences, some youth perceived that the 'elder' generation did not view education as necessary or useful, and were thus less willing to support their children in its pursuit. A number of youths suggested that parents 'chose' not to invest in their children's education or allow their children to forgo financial responsibilities

to the family. Similarly, some lauded families that were willing to forgo personal comforts to support their children's education.

3.4 Opportunities for Education

3.4.1 Literacy and Secondary Education

Where they did speak about starting education, illiterate youth and youth who had left school without a diploma placed requests for more skills-based learning, as provided by NGOs and other organizations. Youth stated that they wanted to see more of such courses in their communities, and indeed, across all locations visited, were able to cite a few programs that had come and gone. In the Karukh district of Nangarhar alone, the field team registered mention of the following short-term courses offered by NGOs on the ground: beekeeping, mobile phone repair, tailoring, and mechanics making. Some youth spoke of these as a useful way to spend their time and build skills. With the barriers to secondary education ongoing, it is perhaps not surprising that youth were not looking for pathways to restart secondary education. One woman, 19, in Zende Jan Herat told us she had stopped going to school in grade 8, on account of 'financial problems' in her family. She shared, "I can't enroll in a university because I have studied up to grade 8. So, I have enrolled in a tailoring class now." Where these courses were available, an ongoing problem raised by youth was their limited spaces and, in some cases, that they had not heard about them in time. Not all of the courses that youth were interested in were explicitly targeted at youth.

However, it is not clear whether existing skills-based courses were tapping into youths' job aspirations for longer-term work or if they were effective in bettering livelihoods. The study was not able to assess the effectiveness of these courses, but interviewees' descriptions rarely contained reports of sustainable livelihood generation activity thereafter. Nor was it clear if youth genuinely believed that these courses would result in livelihood generation (though some might have held out hope that new courses could). The data does confirm that youth viewed these courses as an enjoyable way to spend time, that could fill the aspirational gap for education. More evidence-based approaches to skills training in rural areas is needed to ensure that there are demands for those skills within the local economy.

Desires for more literacy courses came up several times during the course of interviews—but

usually by the literate in their communities. More research into the demand for literacy programs among illiterate youth would be beneficial. There were second-hand reports in interviews, of literacy courses being well-received—among them programs by United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), World Vision, and other organizations that participants could not name. The current data however presents a curious gender split—literacy courses seemed to have more demand and favor with married women rather than men. It could be that attending these courses was an expression of agency which they could more easily express after marriage than before. Further, focused engagement with illiterate youth would help in understanding how to stimulate demand for literacy courses, given the costs of illiteracy (Cree et al. 2015; World Bank 2019a). Both male and female illiterate youth, or youth with very low levels of education, did however frequently raise desires for skills-based learning that could help them secure income – even if they did not explicitly ask for literacy training. Some programs have found success in merging vocational and literacy training (Samuel Hall 2014)

places of learning are too far away. In recent years, there has been a rollout of formal and informal TVET. ‘Informal’ TVET programs are a shorter and more flexible alternative to the formal TVET diplomas, which have an emphasis on practical work. They usually last 6–9 months and are administered through NGOs and other partners. At the time of fieldwork, there were only a limited number of such programs available in the rural areas of Herat, mainly in the Karukh district. Within Nangarhar, Terre des Hommes had also committed to a tailoring program in Dara-i-Nur and Kuz Kunar. Youth in these areas were aware of these courses, even if they were not participating in them. For the most part however, these courses were too far away. Distance presented a barrier because of the cost of transportation, lack of proper roads and means of transport, and the dangers of travel. Distance affected women and poor disproportionately.

3.4.2 Higher Education, TVET, and Skills Training

"My goal as a young person is to continue my education and serve my people. If I fail to serve through education, I will opt for learning a profession to serve my community."
Woman, homemaker (unmarried), 18, Herat City, Herat

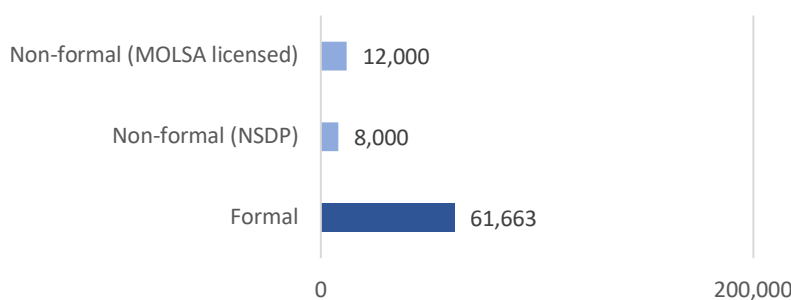
"There is no organization in the skills area and I have not seen, but if some organizations come and teach skills for work, the first person to join the program will be I, because I am interested to have a good job in the future."
Man, 20, unemployed, Karukh, Herat

The high unemployment rate of educated youth calls for further work in advancing skill matches, and education to work opportunities. Higher education, followed by formal vocational training, was associated with considerable prestige among youth across the board. Being accepted into higher education, in the form of a bachelor’s or master’s program, seemed to indicate the highest status, including through passing of the *konkur*. While certificates and diplomas can generate significant prestige, they may not always translate into economic capital. More work in this area could help allocate resources better and boost economic inclusion. Also, it could help to alleviate the discontent noted in this study among educated, unemployed youth. From the current data set, it is unclear if and to what extent these educated youth were ‘holding out’ in hopes of what they perceived to be better job offers—a phenomenon that occurs in other countries (World Bank 2014b).

Youth who could access free tertiary education spoke of it as one of the best opportunities made available to youth. For many rural youths, these

Figure 5: Annual TVET

Formal and informal TVET providers are not able to meet youths’ demands for trainings.



Source: All figures except for Formal TVET are unverified estimates.

4. Youth Voice and Participation

4.1 Relevance to Well-Being and Social Cohesion

Voice and participation in decision-making institutions are important for inclusive development. Unequal access to, influence of, and representation in decision-making institutions can make it even more difficult for marginalized individuals to have their needs met. Effective service delivery for example depends on strong institutions that take citizens' needs into account. While Afghan youth have specific needs and challenges, they often lack the voice to make their needs heard.

Voice and participation can also assist in bolstering social cohesion. Youth are a critical demographic in fostering social cohesion in Afghanistan. Providing youth with jobs may not be enough to promote social cohesion. A 2015 study by Mercy Corps found that "experiences of injustices" were a driving factor in Afghan youths' feeling disaffected by the government (Mercy Corps 2015, see also Brück et al. 2019). Perceived social inequalities are bad for social cohesion, and people are less likely to view decision-making institutions as legitimate if they feel systematically excluded from them on the matters affecting their lives (World Bank 2013c).

4.2 Confidence in Government

"The biggest opportunity for youth to reach their goals is the support of the government, and it doesn't matter whether it is financial or encouraging support."

Woman, 23, university student, Herat City, Herat

"The problems faced by youth are economic problems, no support from the government and the people, unemployment, and more and more economic problems."

Man, 25, part-time teacher, Zende Jan, Herat

Years of conflict have eroded governance systems in Afghanistan. In the parts of Afghanistan that the government does control, the rule of law is weak, especially in rural areas. Weak governance has also given rise to corruption and patronage within public institutions. Afghanistan currently ranks 177 out of 180 countries in the Transparency International Corruptions Perception Index 2017. Studies among both urban and rural youth in Afghanistan draw a link

between these perceptions of weak governance and youths' willingness to engage with government institutions (Lavender 2011; Samuel Hall 2013).

Interviews conducted in Nangarhar and Herat—all in areas currently under government control—support existing evidence that confidence in government institutions is low. The 2019 Asia Foundation perceptions survey, for example, found that among NGOs, government, religious and other local intuitions, Afghans had the lowest levels of confidence in government—52.6 percent for members of parliament, 44.4 percent for government ministers, and 46.9 percent for parliament as a whole (Asia Foundation 2019). Trust in government institutions is a requisite for people to feel empowered to participate and engage with those institutions. Perceptions of nepotism and indifference were the root causes of this mistrust among youth interviewed in this study.

Underlying youths' disappointments were views about the positive role the government could play where it chose to. In locations where the government had provided programs, youth acknowledged the positive difference it had made in their communities. In the semi-rural and rural areas of Nangarhar and Herat, respectively, youth mentioned how the CCNPP had already paved some roads (Kuz Kunar and Dara-i-Nur) and had plans to do so in Karukh. They also shared how the CCNPP had implemented other projects (building wells, canals, and dams in Dara-i-Nur). The expansion of free education in the form of government schools was one area of 'government support' valued by youth in need of these services. Positive perceptions of these interventions where they had occurred, however, were sometimes tempered by the view that power interests in the community were channeling government support for their benefit. Further, the youth did not always attribute these gains to government per se, but rather the specific actions of local influencers who had advocated on behalf of the community.

CDCs appear to enjoy higher levels of confidence than provincial and national government institutions. This came across in interviews. CDCs are not rolled out across Afghanistan, but survey data suggests that where they are, trust is moderately higher in them than in national government

institutions, at 60 percent (Asia Foundation 2019). As the Citizens Charter is established recently, in 2016, a reliable analysis of the reasons for this higher confidence is difficult to establish definitively, and it is beyond the scope of this study. One might speculate that the inclusive election process of the CDCs and their direct interface with local communities, contributes to their higher levels of confidence. Other institutions that enjoy higher trust than CDCs include Community Shuras (67 percent) and religious leaders (71.2 percent) (Asia Foundation 2019).

4.3 Barriers to Participation in Decision Making

“Youth between ages of 18 and 30 years old are not heard. Until they become older or a mother of 7 –8 children.”

Man, under 30, head of a youth association, Kabul

“When a project comes here, the elders take bribe and don't implement the said project. Besides, they don't let youth to take part in these projects, and to give advice and monitor the project. Powerbrokers don't let youth develop.”

Six male casual workers, ages 25–28, speak in agreement during FGD, Kuz Kunar, Nangarhar

Competing spheres of community influence were implicit in youths' descriptions of their communities, with variations between communities. The question of just what sphere youth should aspire to participate, to influence community outcomes, is not always clear. Youth would sometimes mention 'community elders' and 'Community Development Councils' or simply 'the powerful' as separate spheres, and suggested varying levels of influence over the government. For example, in one area visited in Nangarhar, youth indicated that it was power brokers in the community, rather than the CDC chairperson, who had a stronger connection to the government. In another, youth spoke of 'elders' in a close-by community; youth suggested that the CDC was under their influence (this was not the case in all communities). The fact that youth were not always able to refer to a clear, vertical line of influence in their communities speak to the reality of overlapping power interests with which alignment may need to be sought to affect meaningful change.

Youth mentioned how their ability to participate in youth groups or other activities were subject to family consent, which could be withheld for any number of reasons. The power of intergenerational dynamics and family allegiances in guiding youth decision making, and the difficulties of youth acting in

contravention of them, has already been described in Section 1.2. Moral objection by family members and gender norms emerged as two significant family-imposed constraints on youth participation. In interviews conducted with YSC members as well as youth who were not members, accounts arose of families forbidding participation, mainly because they viewed participation as a waste of time. In some parts of Jalalabad, youth who were not members of the YSC claim that youths' participation was restricted because parents viewed the YSCs as 'un-Islamic'.

Despite policy efforts to include women in local and national decision making, gender norms constrain the participation of women. Where women do participate, they often wield less influence than their male counterparts. Several supportive measures have been put in place to promote the participation of Afghan women in government institutions and political spaces, with policies that reserve spaces for women. For example, 25 percent of seats in the lower house and 17 percent of seats in the upper house of parliament are reserved for women (GoIRA 2014; Khan et al. 2012; Odell 2016). However, reports suggest that female members of parliament are not always taken seriously and are frequently treated as proxies for male relatives or connections (Wordsworth 2007). Similarly, the CCNPP reserves equal spaces for men and women in CDCs and sub-committees. However, interviews with YSC members show that women are more likely to report that their voices are not heard on account of their gender (see also Section 6).

Intergenerational dynamics intersect with gender to produce different barriers to participation for young men and women. Young men also face gender-specific barriers in entering spheres of decision making. Younger Afghan women are markedly more literate and educated than older generations of women. They are thus better placed to engage in policy locally and nationally, even if their voices are less likely to be heard by men. This has the effect of filling spaces with younger women in political spheres. Young men, on the other hand, are more likely to compete with older men for positions of influence. This intersection of age and gender dynamics is visible in the demographics of CDCs; young members are more likely to be women. There are 53 percent female CDC members versus 32 percent male CDC members who are under the age of 35. There thus remains merit in actively promoting

the participation of young men and women in decision making forms at both the national and local levels.

PART II: ASSESSING YOUTH SUB-COMMITTEES (YSCs)

5. YSC Goals and Purpose

The CCNPP is an initiative of the Government of Afghanistan initiated in late 2016, to improve the delivery of core infrastructure, emergency services, and social services to participating communities, primarily through strengthened CDCs.

CDCs are central to the management, fair allocation, and use of external funds in their communities. They also have a responsibility to mobilize and apply internal resources for community development, including local skills and talent. Each CDC must put together a 'Community Development Plan,' that sets out their plans for this. Community Development Plans must also identify the most vulnerable and poor in the community and promote their inclusion in the community decision-making process. This inclusive approach is designed to allow communities to learn together and identify critical issues that prevent development and collectively find ways to address these obstacles.

A process of aggregation vertically integrates CDCs into the broader Citizens' Charter structure. 'Cluster CDCs' (CCDCs) aggregate rural CDCs, of which several can exist in any given district. 'Gozar Assemblies (GAs)' aggregate urban CDCs. GAs sit within *nahias*, which are preexisting administrative zones in the urban areas. Each CDC is represented in and must meet with their CCDCs and GAs. CCDCs and GAs have meetings with FPs of the CCNPP in their area (in each case, an FP is an independent organization hired by government). CCDCs and GAs also meet with line ministry representatives, at the provincial level (in the rural areas) and the municipal level (in the urban areas).

YSCs are one of the several 'sub-committees' formed under each CDC. The others sub-committees are: Education, Health, Agriculture, Vulnerable Groups, and Environment. Sub-committees are elected as part of the same participatory process as CDCs.

Each sub-committee has a separate 'Terms of Reference' (ToR), which sets out its respective roles and responsibilities. The ToR of the YSCs is different from those of other sub-committees in key respects. First, YSCs are not directly tasked with the

management and monitoring of government services—although they are expected to assist other sub-committees in this. Second, the YSC ToR is comparatively broad and allows for substantial self-definition (see Box 5).

YSCs comprise men and women in equal numbers, ages 18–35. The age profile of this sub-committee does not necessarily make them unique. Across CDCs, 53 percent of female and 32 percent of male members are under the age of 35.

5.1 YSCs in the Citizens' Charter

The Citizens' Charter training manuals set out the scope and objective of the YSCs. These are very broad and allow substantial room for further definition at the community level. There are several areas in which the ToR are instructive, and which should be taken into account when considering if and how the YSCs can serve as a platform for youth engagement in Afghanistan.

As per its ToR, the objective of the YSC is to serve the needs of the community. The ToR does not identify youth as a specific subset of beneficiaries (see Box 5). The one possible exception is point c. of the ToR, which requires YSCs to create and organize sports teams. Four out of the seven responsibilities listed in the ToR require the YSCs to be reactive to the ongoing needs of either the CDC and its sub-committees, or the needs of people in their communities (b., e., f., g.). This role of the YSC to serve the community is reinforced at the formation stage of the YSCs. Citizens' Charter SOs are to encourage communities to put forward youth who are 'helpful' or 'known to mobilize youth for various activities'.¹⁷

The ToR of the YSCs do not specifically mandate them to undertake youth-specific projects. To the extent they do so, it is out of their initiative, under the purview of the CDC. Point a. of the YSC ToR, assigns YSCs with the broad task of creating an action plan to "uplift the community and contributing toward pro-poor development." YSC members must create the action plan soon after they are appointed, under the guidance of SOs, and deposit it with the CDC.

¹⁷ Source: 2nd Training Manual Institution Building and Monitoring. Note, SOs are the persons hired by FPs under the CCNPP to assist with the election, establishment, training, and ongoing monitoring of CDCs within the first three years of their inception.

Some YSCs used the action plan as an entry point to come up with ideas for youth-specific projects, as well as other projects on how to better serve the community.

Box 5: The YSC ToR

The Youth Sub-Committee will be overseen by the CDCs and will be responsible to:

- Develop a clear, achievable action plan to uplift the community and contribute toward pro-poor development (these may include clean up campaigns of dirt, human and animal feces, garbage, plastic, stagnant water)
- Support any of the thematic sub-committees that require support in campaigns and community mobilization
- Create sport teams (soccer, cricket, and so on) and organize play-offs within the cluster communities
- Create learning circles for children who need after school help in their studies
- Support SOs/Engineers or Extension Agents and the relevant committees in data collection/situation analysis
- Help households that are comprised of elderly persons, disabled persons, and so on, to repair their homes, latrines, and such
- Support any data collection that is needed

Note: The definition of youth = people between the ages 18 and 35.

Source: 2nd Training Manual Institution Building and Monitoring.

An overarching objective of the YSCs is to mobilize youth in their communities. However, the ToR is not gender-neutral in its approach to mobilization. Two of the points in the ToR (a. and f.) make direct reference to physical labor, outdoors. While women do engage in physical labor in Afghanistan, like in most places, it tends to be considered men's work. Further, Part I of this report described the mobility issues faced by many young women in Afghanistan, which might constrain their abilities to work outdoors. The only 'youth-focused' point of the YSC ToR, point c., concerns the organization's creation of sports teams. The YSCs visited almost exclusively described sports activities run by male members, for men in the community. The YSC ToR thus puts considerable onus on the YSC action plan and the initiative of the community to be inclusive of young women.

YSCs are to be comprised solely of 'youth', which the ToR defines as persons ages 18–35. There is no further breakdown of the youth category by age. YSC membership spans an age range of 17 years.

Across this age range, one can expect substantial differences in the status of younger and older YSC members in terms of marriage, number of children, employment, and community position. As the YSC ToR does not mention further subcategories of youth, there are also no safeguards against intergenerational dynamics within the YSCs, including mechanisms to ensure that the voices of younger youth are heard. To the extent any intervention planned through the YSCs is intended for a specific age category of youth (for example, 15–24), the planning of that intervention would need to make this explicit.

The Citizens' Charter training manuals empower CDCs to serve as a platform for 'strengthening citizens' voice'. The manuals are not instructive on whether YSCs should perform a representative function for youth in their communities. This matter is again open to local interpretation. Further, YSCs are not the only way for youth to participate in the CDC. 'Youth' also serve on CDCs and other CDC sub-committees, including in leadership positions. Adding the fact that the YSC ToR orients YSCs to serve the community as a whole, the specific 'youth' focus of the YSCs is open to further definition.

5.2 Urban versus Rural YSCs

In FGDs, YSC members were asked to describe the main goals of their YSCs, and then to give examples of their activities. The study team triangulated their statements with interviews with non-YSC youth, CDC chairpersons, and SOs. The study team also received a copy of each YSCs' 'action plan'. The broad scope and vagueness of the YSC ToR means that in practice there is much variation in what the YSCs do, how the YSCs understand their role, and how the CDCs they operate within understand and support their function. YSCs are unaligned in the extent to which they view youth as a specific beneficiary of their work, YSCs as a platform for youth empowerment, YSCs as a community-focused committee. There are patterns of variation between urban and rural YSCs.

YSC action plans are intended to benefit the 'community'. In the urban areas, the boundaries of the 'community' are not as clear as in the rural, which shows in YSCs' work. Urban areas are generally more heterogeneous, population densities higher, and social connections may be weaker as compared to the rural areas. In the rural areas, the geographic regions of the CDC and CCDC are more likely to align with socially recognized boundaries. In the urban areas, the CDC's geographic boundaries

coincide with pre-existing administrative zones, which may not be socially significant. These differences between urban and rural contexts are noted in Citizens' Charter operating manuals and are an issue to consider in the operations of CDCs overall. YSCs in the urban areas were more likely to engage in activities outside of their designated 'communities' and to work with other YSCs. The YSCs in the rural areas, by contrast, mainly worked within the geographic coverage of their CDCs and did not partner with other YSCs (see Section 8).

In rural areas, YSCs were more likely to say their objective was to help the community. Where they did raise youth as a beneficiary, it was usually alongside the community. In rural areas, discussions with both YSC and non-YSC youth showed they were more attuned to and aware of challenges faced by residents, key power brokers and social stratification, when outside organizations and government 'visited' (and who benefited from their projects), and changes to their community over time. This level of connection likely promoted the community-oriented view of YSCs. So did the reinforcing effect of the community on the YSCs, as the CDC and others called on YSCs to perform various works within the community. Communities also seemed to be more aware of the existence of YSCs in the rural areas, even where the levels of those YSCs were lower than in the urban areas (see Section 6.5 – Youths' Perceptions of the YSCs).

In urban areas, YSCs showed stronger orientation toward youth-focused activities. To some degree, urban YSCs were still actively engaged in community works. However, youth-oriented goals dominated their agenda and their work. YSC members also framed community-oriented work as a matter of youth empowerment or betterment—something heard less in the rural areas. Several reasons might account for the youth orientation of urban YSCs. First, the extent of community connection observed in rural areas was not found in the urban areas (among YSC youth or non-YSC youth). Second, power dynamics, including intergenerational power dynamics, appeared to be more concentrated in rural areas and more diffuse in the urban areas (see Section 7 - Barriers and Constraints). Urban YSCs may thus have more agency to act independently on the projects they cared about.

5.3 Goals and Activities

This section sets out the YSCs main goals and examples of their activities. Responses by YSC members, key informants, SOs, and non-YSC youth show varying levels of activity across YSCs. Urban YSCs were all actively engaged, while this was not always the case in rural areas. One commonality of all YSCs, regardless of their level of activity, was a gap between their high aspirations and their actual levels of activity. YSCs expressed enthusiasm, but they were not always able to put their plans into action. The gap between YSC aspirations and activities is partially due to the barriers and constraints faced by YSCs in their various operational environments, and possible gaps in facilitation (see Section 7).

5.3.1 Education

Addressing gaps in education was a goal shared by YSCs in all locations. Targeting illiteracy and setting up skill-based training for youth were goals shared in both provinces, in both rural and urban areas. The objectives of the YSCs also went further in that YSC youth wished to promote positive attitudes toward education, including intergenerational support for learning (especially for women's education). YSC members appeared on average to possess higher levels of education than other youth in their communities, which might have biased them toward viewing education as important. However, the goals of the YSCs with regard to skills training strongly reflected the demands of non-YSC youth (described in Part I), and similarly revealed a gearing toward tailoring and crafts for women.

The study team noted the highest levels of YSC activity in the urban areas - Herat City and Jalalabad. YSCs in these areas had independently organized literacy courses, tailoring and crafts courses, carpentry, mobile phone repair. For the most part, their initiatives seemed self-started, self-managed, and small-scale, with YSCs in Jalalabad insisting that they supplemented activities out of their own pocket. There was limited mention of partnering with other organizations in the provision of education or training, although YSCs in both Herat City and Jalalabad showed good awareness of programs operating independently in their areas. Overall, higher degrees of connection with other organizations that might help expand training and education activities were desired (see Section 7). However, it is not clear to what extent other organizations are reliant on the assistance of YSCs in urban areas. While

YSCs gave one example of being ‘approached’ about a project by an organization, on the whole, they seemed to describe the activities of other organizations from a distance. One female YSC member in Herat shared her knowledge of training programs by organizations such as HELP and PIN, concluding, “organizations and NGOs could do more if we get close to them.”

Training and education programs were registered in a limited number of rural areas, where YSCs were relatively well-established and active. Rural YSCs seemed more reliant on instruction and guidance from the CDC. YSCs described supervising of learning circles in conjunction with the education committee—as mandated by the YSC ToR. One YSC in Kuz Kunar (semi-rural Nangarhar) attempted to set up a training course for girls, which succeeded only after heavy petitioning for a space to conduct it in. Beyond this, most education work in practice seemed to concern raising awareness about the importance of education. YSCs described relatively small-scale awareness-raising activities, such as a handful of one-on-one conversations with people in the community. There were some stand-out cases. For example, one YSC in the most rural district visited in Nangarhar (Dara-i-Nur) claimed they had set up carpentry and mobile phone repair classes without the help of any organization (this could not be verified).

5.3.2 Jobs

Several YSCs aimed to address youth unemployment. Some were more ambitious than others, for example in Kuz Kunar, Herat City, and Jalalabad, YSCs hoped to ‘bring projects’ to their communities and create jobs. Like non-YSC youth, all YSC members recognized youth unemployment as one of the biggest problems in their communities. Their views also reflected the gendered patterning of non-YSC youth, in that they viewed male unemployment as the major issue. In both urban and rural areas, there was little to show that YSCs had thought about facilitating female employment beyond the parameters described by non-YSC youth—much of the activity they planned for women revolved around tailoring and crafts programs.

As with education, urban YSCs described small-scale, stand-alone activities that had facilitated paid work. YSC members in Herat City mentioned some independent job-coordinating action, connecting youth (men and women) to local businesses and employers. Herat City YSCs also facilitated participation in an expo, in conjunction

with a local women's committee, in which women had the opportunity to present and sell their crafts. Aside from this, the only other independent job creation mentioned was a tailoring workshop in Jalalabad that employed 15 people. Similar to the sentiments shared on education provision, a male YSC member in Jalalabad shared, “if some organization assists us, we will be able to do more for youths.” The impact of these activities could not be verified.

Rural YSCs were almost entirely reliant on projects channeled via the CDC—either by government or by NGOs and other organizations. YSCs and CDCs confirmed that YSCs usually played the role of organizing and mobilizing labor for these projects. Little to no independent ownership of projects that generated livelihoods were described by rural YSCs, even as they desired to take ownership of such projects, including through the assistance of external organizations (see Section 7).

5.3.3 Youth Voice and Advocacy

YSCs in a smaller number of locations mentioned that they wanted to act as a platform to raise youth's concerns to government and nongovernmental stakeholders. There was no obvious rural/urban patterning in YSC's adoption of this role. One female YSC member in Herat City shared, “the goal is to make a relationship-building bridge between youth and the government...identifying youth problems and sharing them with the government and NGOs and supporting youth.” The matter of raising youth’s concerns was raised in at least one YSC in all of the districts visited, except in rural Nangarhar. It is striking that in these rural areas that did not mention this aspiration, they still desired the government to create more opportunities for education and labor in their communities.

In these same locations, YSC members spoke about their work explicitly in terms of youth ‘empowerment’ or ‘influence’. YSC members in rural and urban Herat City and Jalalabad, spoke in more general terms of encouraging youth to take a more significant role in the development of their communities, or ‘empowering’ youth. For example, this female YSC member from Karukh (rural Herat) shared, “the goal of the YSC is to encourage youth...to get involved in the community as they are the backbone of society. When youth are empowered, we will be able to have a developed country.” In the same vein, YSC members in Jalalabad spoke about the

importance of expanding YSC membership to create a critical mass of youth voices that could influence policy. One female participant shared her longer-term vision this way, "there is a saying 'the water pot is filled drop by drop'."

Overlapping with these activities was advocacy work in the community, geared at preserving the rights of youth or informing them of their rights. YSCs seemed to be very active in these domains, which required relatively less financial investment on their part. Male YSC members in Nangarhar mentioned goals to prevent marriage practices perceived to be detrimental for youth, such as forced marriage and high bride prices. Male YSC members also described active interventions in known cases of other young men who were harassing girls on the way to school. Helping drug-addicted youth, and raising awareness against narcotics use, was mentioned in Jalalabad, Herat City and Zende Jan, Herat.

5.3.4 Community Work

In all locations, CDC heads, SOs, and YSC youth all confirmed that YSCs were engaged in assisting other sub-committees with their work. Interview data suggested that the extent of interaction between YSCs and these other sub-committees depended very much on the appetite of these other sub-committees to involve them.¹⁸ Across locations, YSCs were committed to the goal of encouraging youth to help in community projects and to meet community needs.

In rural areas, this helping the community, and other CDC members appeared to make up the bulk of their

activities. Aside from mobilizing labor (above), this type of assistance included activities mandated in the Citizens' Charter training manuals, such as assistance with setting up learning circles in conjunction with the Education sub-committee. Some also assisted in the administration of grain banks, which is the remit of the Vulnerable Group Development sub-committee.

5.4 Gendered Approaches to Activities

"Men can do everything but women can't. Men can exercise sport but women can't. Men can jog but women can't. Men are stronger than women, women are weak. They cannot do more work and activities."

Boy, 17, unemployed, Dara-i-Nur, Nangarhar

The activities of YSCs revealed a gender split, both in who implemented them and in who the beneficiaries were. YSC members described a handful of activities specifically targeted at women. This included awareness raising on child marriages through consultation in the home, helping with programs to set up out-of-home business (like home farms or handicrafts), and supervising women's education. Female YSC members described initiating these activities themselves. However, there were variations in levels of women's activities. In some rural areas, it appeared that it was mainly the men's wing of the YSCs that were active and not the women's. As the availability of women-focused programming was, in some cases, strictly dependent on women's initiative and delivery, inactivity of female YSC members, in turn, affected the range of women-focused activities available to the YSCs.

¹⁸ The study did not interview these other sub-committee members, and so we cannot confirm if, in cases of YSC youth *not* mentioning such assistance, it was because these other sub-committees were just not very active, if they had reservations about the YSCs getting involved, or if other factors impeded coordination.

6. Inclusivity and Engagement of Youth in YSCs

6.1 Membership and Representation

As in the case of all sub-committees, YSCs are designed to be representative of their communities. However, the election process outlined in the Citizens' Charter training manuals does not control longer-term participation. The YSCs visited showed that beyond the initial selection stage, membership and participation could expand or contract. The practical barriers youth face in becoming members, or remaining members, of the YSCs, can affect the representativeness of the YSCs. However, even if a YSC is not fully representative, this need not mean its programming is not inclusive.

The Citizens' Charter training manuals set guidelines for the selection and election of sub-committees and YSC members to promote fair representation in the community. A community election process establishes the membership of CDCs. They include the office bearer positions (chairperson, vice-chairperson, secretary, and treasurer) as well as general members, the number of which depends on community size. Sub-committees are formed by the community, in a meeting in which over half of the community must be present. CDCs must decide on two of their members for each sub-committee. The room is then asked to consider other people in the community with special skills or interests that would make them suitable for specific sub-committees. The same process is used to select neighborhood representatives for different sub-committees. The logic of this latter step is to encourage appropriate representation across socioeconomic profiles of the communities.

Sub-committees should have between 8 and 12 people in their male and female wings. The YSCs visited showed that, in practice, there is scope for YSC membership to expand after selection. The FGDs asked YSC members how they became members. YSC members shared a range of routes to their membership, which fell outside of the initial selection process set out in the Citizens' Charter training manuals. Some shared that they had volunteered themselves out of interest after the selection stage. Others had been approached by YSC members

themselves or by members of the CDC (including the CDC chairperson). There was also mention of being put forward by what appeared to be other powerful influencers in the community, like maliks or 'elders' (though the relative power of these actors could vary by community). Social connection and word of mouth were the most common but not exclusive route. Thus, despite the election procedure, the membership of the YSC is likely to develop quite organically through community communication channels.

Membership was also noted to have fallen, or at least participation stopped. Lack of time and interest emerged as the main reasons for people leaving the YSCs, or not joining in the first place. Lack of activity was the reason one ex-YSC spoken to gave, stating, "they have not done anything in the village yet. My interest has decreased and I have not participated."

YSC and non-YSC youth raised lack of time as another barrier for participation, which raises questions about how employment profiles and family commitments affect YSC membership. Both YSC youth and non-YSC youth shared the view of this man from Zende Jan, Herat, who stated: "those who got membership of the committee had more free time and they were willing and interested." YSC members also cited shifting time commitments as an explanation for why some members had dropped away. Lack of time was raised in relation to work, and more generally with regard to 'personal works' which could include family commitments. To an extent time is indeed a constraint, employment or the nature of employment might be a barrier to participation. As YSC membership tends to exceed the size of a focus group, the study was unable to map the employment status of all YSC members. However, most YSC members spoken to were either unemployed or working part time, which is more common to Afghan youth than being fully employed. There was a slightly lower representation of married women in the YSCs than married men. This could be reflective women's time commitments in the home after marriage, though there was no noticeable skew toward unmarried women in the membership of the YSCs.

Finally, a stated reason for membership falling away or people not joining was lack of personal benefit, usually termed as financial gain. In some YSCs, members mentioned a misunderstanding at the time of selection that membership would result in personal benefit or pay, and frustration when this did not materialize. In both rural and urban areas, YSC members shared the view that remuneration for efforts might make people more likely to join, and for their families to allow them to join. One female YSC member from Jalalabad described this connection between pay and parental consent: "There are no travel costs because we are nearby, but still the parents say that it doesn't pay any money and it's wasting time."

Women faced cultural constraints to YSC membership and participation. Women seemed to face barriers not only in securing an appropriate meeting place but getting to and from it, especially in Nangarhar. This issue feeds back to constraints on women's mobility outside of the home, mentioned in Part I. Women mitigated this problem by meeting within homes and other appropriate meeting places (see Section 7).

Literacy or education are not requirements of YSC membership. However, in some locations, non-YSC youth shared that YSC youth were generally more educated. As YSC membership is determined through a participatory process or personal nomination, and as education was noted as strongly valued in all communities visited (see Part I), it is perhaps not surprising that communities would nominate educated youth into YSC positions. The study was unable to establish the reverse—if educated, youth self-selected into YSC positions. YSC youth sampled had higher education levels than non-YSC members with high representation of university students and high school graduates. There was however representation of lower education levels in both urban and rural YSCs, with just under 20 percent of YSC respondents describing themselves as 'uneducated' or 'illiterate'.

Given the above and the organic development of YSC participation and membership, the representativeness of YSC members is not guaranteed. However, interviews with non-YSC did not generate any perceptions of elitism or exclusion in YSC membership. There was little to suggest that youth who desired to participate were actively being excluded from participation. The few cases of people saying they wished to join YSCs but

were not able to come from youth ages under 18. By CCNPP rules, they are still too young to join as members.

6.2 Inclusivity of Meetings

Aside from setting out the frequency of meetings, the Citizens' Charter training manuals are not instructive on how YSC meetings should be structured. Mechanisms for ensuring the voices of women are heard, as well as those of non-YSC youth, were not evenly enforced by YSCs.

The Citizens' Charter training manuals require YSCs to meet at least twice a month and take minutes. Most YSCs claimed to stick to this timetable or exceed it. They told us that they sometimes met more often, "depending on problems and needs" (male YSC member, Herat). Meeting at least twice a month is also required of CDC and sub-committee meetings (or more during project implementation). In addition, sub-committees must submit their progress to the entire CDC once per month.

A small number of YSCs said that they shared less regular meeting times; once every two or three months and usually irregularly. Some YSC members expressed frustration over this fact, like this man from Herat: "YSC members meet among themselves, but their meetings are not regular...sometimes they hold meetings once a month and sometimes they do not. When they hold their meetings, some of the members don't participate, and they do not write the meeting minutes because they say that members are absent." In Herat, some of the YSCs were less than a year old. Most met regularly, but some mentioned little to no activity to date, with one informing us, "our YSC was established six months ago, and since then, we neither had any activity nor any meeting."

6.3 Inclusion of Women

In most locations visited, YSC meetings were gender-segregated. Separate meetings were central to securing women's participation in some areas. Except for two YSCs visited in Herat, in Herat City and Karukh, all YSCs all indicated that men and women met separately. Male and female YSC members usually gave moral and cultural reasons as to why this was not the case. Men and women in Nangarhar and Herat cited 'cultural' reasons for this division. There was no indication that either would

like to see this change. Even if this were the case, the mobility restrictions cited in Part I, and the existing constraints on female participation in the YSCs, could mean that lack of family permission would be the more significant issue in allowing women to participate in mixed meetings.

Separate meetings between men and women raised logistical challenges for coordination.

Across locations, the level of formal coordination between male and female YSCs varied significantly. In Jalalabad, and the Karukh district of Herat, for example, men and women met separately but were still able to point to procedures by which they would share the agendas and outcomes of their respective meetings, usually through a nominated point of contact. In other cases, men and women seemed to show little to no coordination at all. Female members in one YSC in rural Herat reported that they mostly do not even know the male committee members. Others shared more informal and ad hoc lines of communication, like this lady from rural Nangarhar, who shared, "we don't have any contact with the males. However, if we want to contact them, then we ask our male family members to contact them."

Aside from coordination, women shared reservations that men did not onboard their ideas, and had the final say.

In Herat City, where YSC men and women meet together, both men and women insisted that women and men had an equal voice in YSC matters. In the remainder of the districts, the view that women had equal voice and impact was less unanimous among female members of the YSC. Women were more likely to say that men did not listen to them in the locations where female YSC members were less active and where gender segregation happened. In one YSC in Kuz Kunar, where men and women meet separately but where robust procedures for coordination seemed to be in place and followed, a female YSC member shared this frustration: "We work better than men, and strive to prove ourselves as beneficial...I don't think men will listen to women, nor have they listened."

Still, in the rural areas, in particular, YSCs may be one of the few forums in which young women's voices may be heard.

While it is challenging to glean from the interview data alone, it appeared that in many communities—and especially the more rural areas—there were few alternative forums in which women might have their voices heard.

6.4 Inclusion of Non-YSC Youth

There did not appear to be a uniform procedure of inviting non-YSC youth to attend meetings.

In describing how they came up with projects, YSC youth tended to give general answers about identifying the needs of youth first through discussion in the YSCs or through CDC channels. Some described consulting with their social networks to come up with ideas. They did not describe any formal fact-finding or consultation activity with non-YSC youth. To the extent this existed it was not formalized.

Non-YSC youth across locations shared a lack of knowledge on how to join YSCs or participate in them.

No non-YSC youth gave accounts of being 'excluded' from joining the YSCs where they wanted to. There was also no mention of ethnic exclusion in membership among non-YSC youth, although this cannot be ruled out. When non-YSC youth were asked whether they had ever thought of joining the YSCs, responses were registered along the lines of this man, "If I want to join, I will seek information through my friends and then I will join." (Herat City).

Ethnic discrimination was not mentioned at any point, though it cannot be excluded.

Some YSCs had an ethnically diverse membership and mentioned no problems. The SOs also noted the inclusivity of various ethnicities. YSC youth did, however, at times suggest that ethnic discrimination was a problem in their communities.

6.5 Youths' Perception of YSCs

FGDs asked non-YSC youth if they had ever heard of the YSCs and to share impressions of their activities. Non-YSC youth seemed very much on board with the idea of a youth committee, even if they were not able to point to activities that had benefited them specifically. One area to assess further is how the perceived effectiveness of CDCs affects youths' views of YSCs. The obvious hypothesis is that the perceived effectiveness of the YSC would be informed by the perceived effectiveness that of the CDC.

The visibility of YSCs seemed to be lowest in the urban areas, even as these YSCs were relatively active.

In these areas, respondents had either never heard of the YSCs or shared that while they had heard of them, they were unsure of their specific activities. The distinction between rural and urban areas likely points to the higher level of social connectivity in rural

areas. It is telling that even in rural areas where both YSC and non-YSCs interviews suggested low levels of YSC activity, non-YSC youth were still likely to have heard of the YSCs.

However, where youth had heard of the YSCs, they were positive about their goal and mission—as defined in that specific location. In one YSC visited in Zende Jan, Herat, the YSC had been established within the past year and had not yet engaged in activities. However, youth in this community had still heard of the YSC and were interested in this work. One young man shared, “They haven’t done anything yet. But they have the plan to do so some good work in the future. If they create job opportunities for

youth, it would be very good. And according to what they said they can also help poor people.”

This might be explained, in part, by the high level of alignment between YSC and non-YSC youth in the biggest challenges facing their communities.

When asked about the biggest challenges facing youth in their community, YSC members’ answers aligned and did not conflict with the answers of non-YSC youth. In each community visited, the study team separately asked YSC members and non-YSC members what they viewed to be the main challenges facing youth in their communities, and which categories of youth they perceived to be the most disadvantaged. When comparing the answers of YSC and non-YSC youth, answers were very much the same.¹⁹ The aspirations and programming of YSCs were inclusive, in the sense that they strongly aligned with the issues expressed by youth.

¹⁹ Interviews were conducted within a brief time frame and there was little opportunity for participants to communicate with each other about their answers.

7. Barriers and Constraints faced by YSCs

For certain activities, especially in the fields of employment and education, YSCs were dependent on the help of other actors—the CDC, government and NGOs, and other organizations that could partner with them. Further, levels of community support for their activities could also constrain their work, especially in matters deemed 'sensitive' such as women's education, 'culture change' activities, or activities that infringed on the business interests of others in the community.

7.1 Lack of Appropriate Meeting Place

None of the YSCs spoken to had a designated space or office. Some CDCs benefited from a designated office, which YSCs could use. However, most relied on community infrastructure, for example: the *malik's* house, mosque, the local shura office, guesthouses or 'culture halls' of the community. The lack of appropriate meeting space or designated office was noted as a broader constraint in YSC activities. Lack of a set meeting space could introduce uncertainty over meeting times, and also the availability of space in which to conduct activities. SOs for 4 out of the 14 YSCs visited proposed a designated meeting space or office for YSCs. It is not clear to what extent this is an issue facing YSCs only or other CDC sub-committees too.

The provision of location by others can open up risks of external influence. In the case of YSC members, such influence also manifests in intergenerational power dynamics. In an interview with one YSC, men described that they met at the *malik's* house "for the sake of the elders," adding that an independent space would allow them "to solve people's problems in an ensured place and avoid any ethnic discrimination." A lack of dedicated space could also leave YSCs vulnerable to community power dynamics. One YSC in rural Nangarhar shared that they wished to set up training workshops for women. Their first points of contact in the community, including the local school, refused to provide space. Eventually, after delays, the YSC found space in the bazar, which they rented by raising funds themselves.

Women faced specific logistical constraints regarding an appropriate meeting space. Some women suggested their meetings took place in private sheltered areas—such as the home of a YSC member

or CDC committee member, in sheltered parts of the *malik's* home, or (where it existed) the CDC office. In *rural Nangarhar in particular, however, young women* described an ongoing problem of securing family consent to their attending meetings.

7.2 Financial Constraints

YSCs, SOs, and CDC chairmen cited lack of funds as the main constraint on YSCs. Lack of funds was a view heard in both the rural and in the urban areas. SOs for all YSCs locations claimed that lack of financial resources was a constraint on the YSCs. Some YSC members shared their positive experiences of having received funds to support projects via the CDC, but this was not a common experience in all projects. Members also shared accounts of activities stopping due to lack of funds. Funding was, in other words, irregular and may be either provided, absent or pulled during the implementation of a project.

YSC members, though only male YSC members in the rural areas, took the initiative in petitioning wealthier members of their community for support in their projects. Asking for resources in the community, including space to conduct meetings, gave actors in a position to provide resources to the YSCs, influence over whether or not the planned activities should take place. While funding from community interests can be an essential channel for YSC work, this also raises questions about their ability to act independently of power interests in the community. This question also applies to the CDCs. This pathway of directly petitioning wealthier men in the village is likely open to men only, and no women mentioned petitioning the wealthy personally. To that extent men had greater leverage to bring finances into YSC activities; this too might be a cause of gender disparity.

There was a prevalence of YSCs members claiming to pay for activities out of pocket—as confirmed by CDC heads, key informants, and SOs. As with the above, data are not available to give a sense of how big a percentage of these donations made up YSC expenditure. The equity of YSC members paying for YSC activities could be questioned, and it is not clear if and how this affects membership. The CDC and sub-committee selection process safeguards against elite capture, and interviews did not suggest that YSC's

actively recruited wealthier community members after the election.

7.3 Community Support

Activities that touched on cultural sensitivities, including 'changing' culture, were met with the most community resistance. YSC youth in Nangahar for example described an unsuccessful attempt to try to stop the distribution of money at funerals. The approval of CDC heads, elders, and (depending on the project) community power interests were especially vital in these activities and other culture-change activities, such as lowering bride prices or reducing firing of guns at weddings.

Competing spheres of community influence were implicit in youth's descriptions of their communities. Other power brokers were mentioned in the communities, who could override YSC plans of the YSC even where backed by the CDC. Youth would sometimes mention 'community elders' and 'CDCs' or simply 'the powerful' as separate spheres. 'Mosques' and 'clerics' emerged as categories on their own. The fact that youth were not always able to refer to a clear, vertical line of influence in their communities speak of overlapping power interests. There were some accounts of YSC plans being approved by the CDC in principle but blocked by power interests in the community. One YSC shared how they had tried to prevent deforestation activities but were ultimately unsuccessful as these infringed on the business interests of an influential community member. While anecdotal and unverified, these accounts reflect a perception among some youth of power structures that extend beyond the CDC.

Community perception could also constrain participation in the YSCs. In interviews conducted with YSC members as well as youth who were not members, accounts arose of families forbidding attendance, mainly because they viewed participation as a waste of time. In some parts of Jalalabad, youth who were not members of the YSC claimed that youth's participation was restricted because parents viewed the YSCs were 'un-Islamic'. YSC members in Jalalabad confirmed this view. One female member declared, "most youth don't want to participate in it because they say that it's against Islam and doing un-Islamic activities. The families are mostly barriers against participation..."

7.4 Availability of Partners

YSCs recognized the need for partners to launch projects in the areas they cared most about—employment and education. Education and work were the areas *all* youth cared most about (see also Part I). In rural areas, desires for these types of partnerships dovetailed with calls for external actors to be more actively engaged in local job creation—a desire shared by non-YSC youth too. In the case of education, YSCs were more realistically able to source local teachers and space on their own initiative

Aside from these efforts, YSCs mainly appeared to be 'waiting' for these organizations to approach them or their CDCs. The fact that outreach to institutional partners is more limited might not be due to lack of initiative but lack of perceived access. The one exception to this was the YSCs in Herat City. Here, YSC youth reported reaching out to NGOs in the course of their projects—a task that might have been made easier by their relatively higher presence in the urban over the rural areas.

In the rural areas, YSCs appeared particularly constrained to secure partnerships independently, having to rely instead on receiving them via the formal CDC structure. The usual pathway of 'partnerships' was through the outsourcing of work by the CDC. Interview data could not establish the extent to which CDCs were also advocating for specific partnerships on behalf of YSCs. If this was indeed happening, neither CDC chairpersons nor YSCs mentioned it. Instead, rural CDC chairpersons spoke favorably of the capacity of YSCs to mobilize labor in response to outside projects implemented via the CDC. While CCNPP procedure requires that sub-committees defer and liaise with the CDC, it appeared that in practice, CDCs and other sub-committees were the first points of contact.

Some YSCs expressed frustration at their lack of say in programs set up by outside partners. As divisions between CDC leadership and the YSCs also seemed to map onto divisions of age and seniority, there was possibly more scope for the voice of the YSC members to be 'drowned out.' One female YSC member in rural Nangahar provided this assessment of the difficulties facing her YSC, as they tried to ensure jobs were distributed fairly among youth in her community: "whenever there is a project of road or canal building, the community elders (Malik) take the lead and do whatever they want...We have raised

our voice, but no one has heard our voice and made us unhappy. They even make fun of us."

Implicit in YSCs' frustrations were their lack of ownership, particularly in government-funded projects. Unlike other sub-committees, the YSCs do not have a clear mandate for managing and monitoring government services. The broad YSC ToR, which instructs YSCs to 'assist' other committees, and the lack of instruction in the Citizens' Charter training manuals beyond this, seems to give CDCs and sub-committees much flexibility over if and how they include the YSCs in their activities.

7.5 Skills

Neither YSC members, CDC chairpersons, SOs, or non-YSC members assessed that the YSCs were lacking the skills needed to do their jobs. To illustrate this point, however, they mainly pointed to education levels or the ability to carry out manual work. As stated above, education might have fed into the selection of YSC members in the first place, reflecting the social value of education. KIIs (including CDC chairpersons) mostly defended the skills of the YSCs,

pointing to the fact that they were educated, creative, and physically strong. When asked if YSCs possessed sufficient skills, one female CDC member raised YSC members' help in putting together pavements as irrefutable proof of their skills. However, with regard to labor, there were some comments by KIIs that while a good labor source, YSCs were not skilled labor.

There was little discussion by KIIs of YSCs' 'soft-skills'—leadership and socio-emotional skills—even as many lauded the helpfulness and enthusiasm of the YSCs. The outlier in feedback was from this school principal in Karukh, Herat, who made the only reference to leadership and soft skills: "Yes, the YSC members have the skills and abilities ...but they have no enough practical experience. If they are provided with seminars about social conduct, awareness, how to behave with people, and provide public awareness, their abilities will enhance, and their works will be more beneficial. It is mentionable that all of the YSC members are active and can do their activities properly." YSC members themselves made little mention of lacking soft skills.

8. Encouraging Cross-YSC Activities

There were accounts of YSCs working with other YSCs in Herat City (men and women), Jalalabad (men only), and Kuz Kunar (men and women). YSC members viewed these collaborations as very beneficial. 'Cross-community solidarity', joint projects, and exchanging ideas were the main cited benefits of these collaborations. Not all YSCs in the urban areas were engaged with other YSCs however (only one in Jalalabad told us they had not yet seen the need). In the rural areas, YSCs either said they had considered it but not yet seen the need, or that the idea had never occurred to them.

No one seemed opposed to the idea of collaboration in principle. When asked if they were currently

collaborating with other YSCs, it was as if they were considering this question for the first time. It is not clear if elders/parents would allow such cross-collaboration.

Some female YSC members from the rural areas said outright that they would not be allowed to go to another village. Given the already existing constraints on women participating in YSCs within their communities, restrictions on cross-YSC work is predictable. So meaningful collaboration may be constrained in real terms for women unless workarounds are found.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Promoting Pathways to Youth Inclusion

Findings

This report has analyzed pathways to youth inclusion in Afghanistan, focusing on the domains of employment, education, and voice and participation. The study shows the multiple ways in which youth are excluded from these domains on account of their age, and associated lower voice and agency. While the constraints faced by women are well-recognized in Afghanistan, this study draws attention to the specific barriers faced by younger women, especially those who are unmarried. Further, the study highlights the marginalization of younger men's voices, in family and in decision-making institutions. The 'youth' category intersects with other types of marginalization already recognized in Afghanistan (such as gender, ethnicity, rurality, and IDP and returnees) to limit agency further. In the context of shrinking opportunities and insecurity, a policy focus on youth inclusion in Afghanistan is thus warranted.

Youth are an under-considered group in project design and rarely identified as a disadvantaged or vulnerable group. Several national projects indirectly benefit youth without explicitly defining them as a target beneficiary group, such as the MCCG, Targeting the Ultra Poor, and WEE-RDP. Youth may join these programs, but their participation is not protected, nor are the additional barriers to their involvement explicitly addressed, such as the possibilities for younger men to miss out on places or the additional mobility constraints faced by young, unmarried women. Similarly, these and other projects do not take into account the specific vulnerabilities of younger women and men who participate in these projects.

Employment and self-employment opportunities for urban and rural women are currently limited, including in targeted interventions. The strong demand for, and supply of, tailoring programs for women is indicative of the fact that women will take up skills and work-based programs where the work, and the spaces in which the work takes place, are deemed acceptable to women and their families. In

the communities visited, the primary objection is not to women's work per se but rather the contexts in which women's work is carried out. The challenge is, thus, to create a broader menu of options for women to work and expand their skills, especially for unmarried women or younger married women, whose mobility constraints may be more significant.

Short-term skills-based training programs hold the promise of reaching rural youth, and they are in demand, but evidence of their effectiveness is limited. Most rural youths are either illiterate or have discontinued secondary education, which in many cases excludes them from formal and informal TVET programs. Fiscal constraints, among others, also mean that the rollout of TVET is not keeping up with the demand for skills training among youth. Community-based training, which takes into account these lower education levels, is thus the most realistic option for transferring skills to rural youth. However, there is limited sector wide information on community-based skills trainings' effectiveness, while case-by-case program evaluations suggest more work is needed to promote linkages to the job market. Further, demand-led supply may not have the intended effect of generating livelihoods, as the reasons rural youth demand these programs are diffuse and not necessarily linked to job creation alone.

A shortage of infrastructure, education, and employment opportunities in the rural areas contribute to perceptions among rural youth that they are left behind in the development agenda. Both urban and rural youth perceived a lack of opportunities for youth, blaming instability, a weak economy, and government 'indifference'. However, rural youth additionally blamed shortcomings on their rural status while invoking expectations for the government to fill gaps. It is worth noting that fieldwork for this study was conducted in rural areas with relative levels of stability and established government reach, including via established CDCs. The fact that such views were still prevalent in these communities suggests that more work is needed for the government to capture the trust of rural youth, who comprise the majority of youth in Afghanistan and, indeed, most of the Afghan population.

While education and employment opportunities for youth rightly remain a top policy priority,

focusing on these areas alone misses opportunities to bolster social cohesion at a critical time for Afghanistan. A focus on economic inclusion alone is unlikely to meet the multidimensional challenges that lead to youth exclusion. While many young Afghan women aspire to work, a substantial number do not. On current economic forecasts, most Afghan youth who want to work are unlikely to have this aspiration met. An agenda that focuses on job creation and skills training alone is likely to pass these youth by and miss opportunities for fostering social cohesion, particularly among disaffected young men.

Recommendations

Strengthen dialogue and work with government counterparts to develop a shared commitment to youth inclusion, including through specification of priority objectives. Addressing these barriers could, at times, involve discussing sensitive topics such as anti-government sentiment, ethnic marginalization, and gender norms. The *Afghanistan National Youth Policy* (GoIRA 2014) and *National Youth Strategy* (2017–2021) are important documents in the furtherance of the youth agenda, which could be developed further on in the years to come.

Project design should be mindful of the specific disadvantages faced by Afghan youth, and intersecting vulnerabilities. Intersecting vulnerabilities include those faced by women and girls, and youth who lack the social networks to help them 'get by' (IDPs, returnees, orphans). Project design should seek to empower youth within their social networks while screening for potential disruptions that could further disempower youth—for example, by inciting intergenerational or intergroup tensions or creating community divisions around gender.

Focus on expanding skills-based training in rural areas, with a critical eye on livelihood creation—for men and women. Working with communities to explore required skills, including in the field of agriculture where most youth are likely to remain employed, should form the basis of future investments in this area. More work needs to be done addressing the social and cultural barriers women (and particularly young, unmarried women) face in project participation, including through the exploration of opportunities that are culturally acceptable to women and their families. Finally, while adding literacy components to skills-based training,

as some providers have done, might be effective, more targeted research on literacy programs for youth is needed, as current data give little indication of either the demand for these courses or the effectiveness of existing courses.

Complement economic inclusion efforts with interventions that bolster social cohesion. Strengthening of mental health and substance abuse services, interventions for conflict management, and expansion of voluntary activities could all be considered. Interventions that engage youth as agents of change in their communities and that engage them in government programming could be useful in both building social cohesion and bolstering goodwill with the government. Engaging youth in this way may be particularly beneficial to youth, many of whom feel left behind by the government on the one hand, and disempowered in their communities on the other. YSCs are an obvious mechanism through which to do this, but other avenues could be explored.

Working with the YSCs

Findings

The study shows how the broad mandate of the YSCs under the CCNPP leaves substantial room for local-level definition. Unlike other CDC sub-committees, YSCs do not have ownership of receiving or monitoring specific services under the CCNPP. They are mainly directed to react to the needs of the community or to help other CDC sub-committees. While the YSC action plan, in theory, provides YSCs with substantial scope for self-definition, this freedom borders on a lack of direction, which not all YSCs are equipped to fill. Further, YSCs are left open to the definition of others at the local level (including the CDC as a whole, community power interests, and intergenerational dynamics). YSCs are thus heterogenous in their activities, and their common purpose is not apparent.

Critically YSCs are unaligned in the extent to which they view themselves as a youth-oriented committee. This is perhaps not surprising, given that the mandate of the YSC focuses so heavily on the community. The onus is currently on YSCs, with the CDCs' support, to create a youth agenda in their communities—but it cannot be guaranteed that they will do so. YSCs are unaligned in how they see: YSCs as a community versus youth-focused committee (or both), YSCs as a platform for youth empowerment, YSCs as a committee that mobilizes in the community,

or that serves to mobilize other youth in the community.

Broad distinctions can be drawn between the operational contexts of urban and rural YSCs, with capacity constraints falling more so on rural YSCs.

As compared to urban YSCs, rural YSCs may have less opportunity to access NGOs and other organizations for partnerships and create partnerships with other YSCs in their cluster. On the other hand, rural YSCs may have more visibility and embeddedness in their communities. This visibility could be a point to leverage for youth mobilization in the rural areas, and future interface activities with the government. However, the higher visibility can also lead to overexposure of their perceived shortcomings.

Mobilization capacities of YSCs rest in part on trust in and local influence of the CDCs, which varies significantly and especially in rural communities.

The number of locations visited for this study is limited (eight rural YSCs). However, differences in community power dynamics across communities, even in CDCs relatively close to each other, were apparent in the interview data. Such dynamics can directly affect YSC operations, where funding and other materials, including places to conduct meetings, are solicited from others within the community, for example, meeting places or financing of activities. Further, the level of confidence residents place in the CDC/YSC cannot be taken for granted, as residents may look to and trust alternative (and potentially competing) institutions.

YSC aspirations tended to outstrip their capacity significantly, especially in the areas they cared most about: employment and education.

There was an overwhelming view among both urban and rural YSCs that 'outside' assistance, such as through government or NGOs, was required to help them further these two goals. In the rural areas, YSCs described their job facilitation activities in terms of scouting workers for projects that had entered via the CDC. Youth representation/empowerment was a less-mentioned goal, although strong in some areas and less reliant on outside support.

Gender gaps in YSC activities and participation can be attributed to the cultural context, but also to institutional factors within the CCNPP.

The YSC ToR is not gender-neutral, which can have a negative impact on women's participation. A lack of reference to activities that could solely be carried out by women means that female YSC members do not have any

protected domains of responsibility. Meanwhile, the most active YSCs in both provinces displayed a gendered division of labor, for example, with women focusing on activities in the domestic sphere or other operations that benefited women. Claims by female YSC members that men were not 'listening' to them were frequent. Aside from gender dynamics, this can also be due to coordination constraints where men and women meet separately.

Overall, it would appear that some YSCs benefit from stronger facilitation than others.

In addition to different objectives, YSCs displayed varying levels of organization, frequency of meetings, interaction with the CDCs, inclusivity (especially of women), and consistency of membership. The study did not evaluate the extent of assistance provided by FPs.

Recommendations

Consider to what extent YSCs are to focus on youth as beneficiaries.

If there is an appetite for this, further institutional definitions of the YSCs in the CCNPP operations manuals and training might be required. Further definition could seek to 'safeguard' the youth orientation at the local level, and also ask FPs to train YSC members in their youth-focused programming. Additions could also be made to strengthen the participation of 'younger youth', or other vulnerable subcategories of youth. Finally, if there is interest in working with YSCs to raise youth voices beyond the community level, this should also be made clear. Further training of YSCs in this regard, and support through the CCNPP institutional structures, would be required if YSCs are to serve as a platform for youth.

Address the current gender imbalance in the YSC ToR and strengthen facilitating practices to promote the inclusion of women.

Defining specific responsibilities for women, in a way that does not limit their work to those responsibilities, could be one solution. Another could be to further orient YSCs to women as beneficiaries of their work (which may have the indirect effect of mobilizing women in the community to help them). This suggests scope for improving female participation where female-appropriate responsibilities and protections are in place. Currently, there are mechanisms in place for female YSC members to communicate with each other via the SOs. However, since YSCs only receive active support and monitoring by FPs in the first three years of their inception, a sustainable solution is required to the problems of male/female coordination in the YSCs

going forward. One solution already used in some areas is for women to 'nominate' a more senior female member of the community to carry messages to the male YSC members.

Visit barriers and enablers of cross-YSC partnerships in rural areas. Beyond meetings at the cluster level, discuss the realistic options for cross-YSC coordination of activities and the benefits of doing so. Conversations with FPs might help to disentangle the local level constraints on YSC operations and shortfalls in facilitation. Women's mobility and insecurity (for men and women) are likely to be continuing barriers to cross-YSC coordination in some areas.

Explore avenues to facilitate partnerships between NGOs and YSC, including by raising the profile of YSCs with other stakeholders. Supporting the personal initiative of YSC members in this regard might be one avenue. Raising the visibility of the YSCs among these stakeholders, including by making

clear how they serve to benefit youth, could also promote outreach and awareness on the part of these organizations.

Continue to work at the community level to understand the power dynamics and social constraints of rural YSCs, in preparation for interventions. In testing and rollout of any future interventions, rapid assessments of institutional power structures of these communities would be needed in advance of programming via the YSCs. Given the current context of fragility and the strength of social networks and hierarchies in some locations, there are likely to be differences between communities in how conducive engagement with the YSCs will be to reaching Afghan youth. For pilots at least, it may be productive to identify and work in those areas where the CDCs are known to be relatively established and where constraints on local participation are not so significant.

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