



Key Findings of the Innovative Research that Measures the Vocational Training Impact on Social and Economic Cohesion

- *The Effects of Vocational Training on Bias towards Hosts and Refugees: Findings from Jordan and Lebanon*

Executive Summary

The Mercy Corps Economic Development pillar in Jordan believes that in order to achieve long-term sustainable change, youth should be at the core of all initiatives. For this reason, the pillar continues to take a Market Systems Development (MSD) approach throughout the entire life-cycle of any program - starting from planning and ending at implementation. This agile methodology is unique to Mercy Corps, and not often seen in other organizations. The MSD approach directly addresses the underlying causes of market dysfunctions, allowing project teams to indirectly facilitate change by partnering with key stakeholders within targeted ecosystems. The indirect facilitation ensures sustainability in the target communities where Mercy Corps beneficiaries live. If implemented correctly, this approach leads to reduced poverty, sustainable change and improved livelihood opportunities for all groups, especially poor and marginalized youth.

Under the Access to Justice and Jobs in Jordan (A2J) project, Mercy Corps adopted the MSD approach during its planning phase. The project team conducted a youth-led market assessment (YLMA) in 2017, allowing youth from target communities to assist the project team in collecting information about employment opportunities as well as insights on what skills employers look for in youth. The strong partnerships made under the Access to Justice and Jobs project allowed for a total of 697 vulnerable youth to be equipped with valuable skills and experiences needed to obtain an employment opportunity.

The Access to Justice and Jobs selects its beneficiaries through a vulnerability assessment that takes into consideration: Age, Gender, employment status, physical health as well as a person's level of motivation to enroll in the program. Selection occurs on an on-going rolling basis, once a beneficiary is deemed eligible, they are automatically enrolled in either a vocational training course or matched into an apprenticeship. This matching process was based on the Youth-Led Market Assessment conducted during the planning phase of the program in 2017. The assessment identified industries, which have a high demand or willingness to hire youth employees (ages 25-30) as well as allow for non-Jordanians to work.

These employment interventions not only equip youth with valuable hard and soft skills needed for employment but also bring together Jordanian and Syrian refugees in a different context. Within the vocational training classrooms Syrian and Jordanian youth are encouraged to interact and learn from one another. This level of interaction as well as one of the program's high-level indicators¹ posed the question of - do the vocational training interventions create an unforeseen in-direct impact of improved cooperation and social cohesion between hosts and refugees.

The Access to Justice Project with support from the Dutch Government, designed a robust quasi-experimental research that aims to generate credible evidence on the attributable impact of program's employment intervention on economic and social outcomes using game theory and surveys as the main methodology.

To gain a true understanding of the impact - data was collected directly from the beneficiaries to understand their own personal perceptions. In addition, their behavioral changes were measured by testing preferences towards others through game theory.

Attitudes and overall perceptions were measured in the form of surveys. Participants were asked questions about their life optimism, economic optimism, and willingness to engage individuals of other nationalities in both a social and economic context. Sample questions:

¹ Indicator 4.1: Number and % of programme beneficiaries who report that they see a socio-economic future for themselves in the area where they currently live



- Life optimism: how likely they felt it was that their life would be better in 12 months.
- Economic optimism: how likely they felt it was that their economic status would be better in 12 months.
- Willingness to engage with individuals of other nationalities in economic and social activities.

Surveys are a great and reliable method to collect information from individuals, however not the ideal method to measure a person's perceptions and behaviors. Surveys collect information in the form of direct questions, which pose the risk of individuals not answering truthfully in fear of judgment or they might feel that an organization such as Mercy Corps (or any other INGO) is looking for certain answers. No formal evidence around this has been collected.

However, to measure the beneficiaries' behaviors and perceptions game theory was used instead of direct survey questions. Two games were selected to measure the beneficiaries' behaviors and levels of trust towards others:

1. **Dictator Game²**: This game measures perceptions towards others in inner and outer groups. In the Dictator Game participants were given approximately \$7 USD in local currency, and were told they could divide the money between themselves and their partner as they saw fit.
2. **Stag Hunt Game³**: This game measures levels of trust between inner and outer groups. In the Stag Hunt game, participants can choose whether to coordinate with their partner so they can both receive a large payoff (approximately \$7 USD), however they are not able to plan with their partner and they only receive this higher payoff if both players make the same choice. If only one player chooses to coordinate, that player receives no payoff. Otherwise, players can choose to go it alone and receive a lower, but guaranteed, payoff (approximately \$3.50 USD). We chose to include both games to differentiate between preferences towards others (the Dictator Game) and beliefs and expectations of others (the Stag Hunt Game).

In total a sample size of 376 hosts and refugees was achieved. Data was collected at four points, during:

1. Outreach: Before entering the program
2. Baseline: First day of vocational training
3. Midline: Last day of vocational training
4. End line: six months after completing the training.

Initial Findings

- Acceptance into a vocational training does improve economic optimism initially at baseline, but acceptance into a training does not indicate an increase in overall life optimism. Youth's level of optimism towards their life remained the same throughout the entire study. It is to be noted that the spike in economic optimism does decrease at the end of the vocational training (midline). This is to be expected, as a youth had a temporary positive outlook toward their economic situation upon being accepted into a vocational training, however as they went through the course, the beneficiaries were reminded of the harsh labor market conditions and their economic optimism levels went back to normal. This is further supported when comparing optimism levels of control and treatment group - Youth enrolled in the training have very close optimism levels to those who were not enrolled.

² According to the book *International Journal of Game Theory*, the Dictator Game is summed up as "one player, the dictator, divides a fixed amount of money between himself and one other, the recipient".
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs001820050072>

³ The Stag Hunt game originated from Jean Jacques Rousseau's scenario: Two hunters can either jointly hunt a stag (an adult deer and rather large meal) or individually hunt a rabbit (tasty, but substantially less filling).



- The youth behaved differently based on whether they were paired with someone of their own nationality or a different nationality. Although the program does not increase overall generosity to one's partner, those enrolled in the vocational training give relatively less to partners from their own group, showing less in-group favoritism.
- Those enrolled in the vocational training program are more likely to trust their partner, to also make a large investment. This information is important to note as their overall outlook is more positive and they are now interacting with the inner group. It didn't matter the nationality of the partner, but because they were interacting together trust grew.
- Less trust was seen amongst the youth who were not enrolled in a vocational training program.
- Bias towards other nationalities is reduced amongst those who were enrolled in a vocational training course.

Results from the research were analyzed to ensure that future MC programming better serves end-beneficiaries in the future. The following has been concluded:

- Recognize the power imbalances between hosts and refugees when designing employment programs.
- Employment programs can increase stability, if used appropriately: much research, including from Mercy Corps, has shown that employment programs do not consistently increase stability. Part of the explanation for why employment programs may not increase stability in certain contexts is that mobilization for violence is related to political ideology rather than for primarily economic reasons. Economic scarcity often drives negative attitudes about refugees.
- Employment programs need to incorporate interventions that increase demand within the markets: research shows that investment in increasing employment opportunities, not just skills, is essential for the sustainability.
- Organizations should explicitly design vocational training programs to reduce bias among hosts and refugees: results showed how employment programs reduce bias between hosts and refugees where economic issues are not the primary driver of negative attitudes between groups. The reduction in bias was not as tied to economic gains, and a reduction in bias continues even six months after completing the vocational training course.

Full Report

Background

The Syrian War and Syrian refugee crisis has been a prevalent matter in Jordan. 2020 marks the war's tenth year. It has led to over five million people fleeing Syria's borders, with little prospect of returning home. While some refugees have traveled to Europe, the United States, and elsewhere, most have stayed in the region. Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey have absorbed a vast majority of refugees. Although all three countries are in the upper-middle income bracket, they also struggled with unemployment and service provision, even before the influx of refugees. Many policy makers are consequently concerned that the instability within Syria would spread across the region due to exacerbated pressures on already fragile economies and institutions. Mercy Corps has been at the frontlines of the crisis and has witnessed the economic socio-economic effects the crisis has had on refugees as well as host communities.

To address the risk that economic pressures could increase instability, Mercy Corps, with funding from the Dutch government, implemented economic development programs in Jordan and Lebanon. Each program includes an employability component that targets youth. The theory underlying the employability component of these programs was that if youth experienced or perceived reduced economic scarcity, there would be fewer tensions between hosts and refugees.



The Access to Justice and Jobs (A2J) program in Jordan aims to equip youth ages 18-25 with the needed skills set to succeed in the job market. This comes in the form of both vocational training, where beneficiaries learn from key stakeholders within the market as well as in the form of apprenticeships. Apprenticeships allow for youth to learn hands-on from potential employers. In addition to building the capacity of youth, the A2J program partners with key ecosystem stakeholders to improve training facilities, assist training facilities in obtaining governmental certification, allowing them to provide non-Jordanian trainees with employment certificates. This holistic approach ensures that the entire market system is improving, creating more sustainable change, which eventually better serves the programs end-beneficiaries.

Based on a joint interest of Mercy Corps and the Dutch government in examining the correlations between employment and stability, Mercy Corps and external research company collaborated to design a quasi-experimental impact evaluation research. The research examines whether vocational training programs reduce bias between hosts and refugees, thus reducing the chances that tensions between hosts and refugees would erupt deeply rooted discrimination and violence.

Research Design

To answer the research questions, a quasi-experimental impact evaluation was designed aimed to measure the attributable impact of Mercy Corps' employment intervention on economic and social outcomes.

a) Research set-up

All participants in the study applied to the A2J vocational training. Acceptance into the vocational training was determined by vulnerability criteria, specifically: age, gender, employment status and physical health, as well as "motivation" to engage in the program. This group is the treatment or intervention group. Those in the control group were not accepted into the program since they were considered less vulnerable.

b) Data Collected

To assess the effects of the A2J vocational training, a combination of measures was used to determine changes in attitudes, perceptions and behaviors. These measures were collected in both the form of surveys and results from games.

Attitudes and Perceptions: In the form of a survey, youth were asked questions related to their:

- Life optimism: how likely they felt it was that their life would be better in 12 months.
- Economic optimism: how likely they felt it was that their economic status would be better in 12 months.
- Willingness to engage with individuals of other nationalities in economic and social activities.

Behaviors: A key question of this study was how participating in the vocational training affected youth's engagement with those from the other group (Jordanians with Syrians and Syrians with Jordanians).

Assessing changes in behaviors was determined through two behavioral games, where youth are given a fictional partner to play a game with. A brief description on their partner is given to each participant, including what they liked to do in their free time, what they liked to eat, marital status and approximate age. While there are strong cultural overlaps between Jordanian and Syrian communities, particularly pertaining to language, colloquial terms for food and preferences for particular foods, delineate along national lines. Field tests showed that these indicators provided a hint strong enough that players knew their partner's nationality when prompted. When presented together with the other information, however, field tests also showed that it did not give away the purpose of the experiment. The games used:

1. **Dictator Game:** used to test preferences towards others. In this game, youth are given approximately \$7 USD in local currency, and were told they could divide the money between themselves and their partner as they saw fit.
2. **Stage Hunt Game:** used to assess trust levels. In this game, youth participants can choose whether to coordinate with their partner so they can both receive a large payoff (approximately \$7 USD), however they are not able to plan with their partner and they only receive this higher payoff if both players make the same choice. If only one player chooses to coordinate, that player receives no payoff. Otherwise, players can choose to go alone and receive a lower, but guaranteed, payoff (approximately \$3.50 USD).

Research has shown that largely people are less likely to cooperate with people from other groups when playing these and similar games (Bernhardt et al., 2006). For example, people will sacrifice some of their own benefit for a member of their own nationality in order to seem fair (Whitt and Wilson, 2007), but do not extend this to other groups/ nationalities.

c) Frequency of Data Collection:

Data was collected from both the treatment and control groups at four different time periods. The four data collections were as follows:

- Outreach: Before training starts to determine matching
- Baseline: During the first day of training (approximately one week after outreach)
- Midline: At the last day of the vocational training (trainings ranged from two to eight weeks)
- Endline: Six-months post vocational training

The interaction of the program and the data collection efforts is shown in Figure 1.

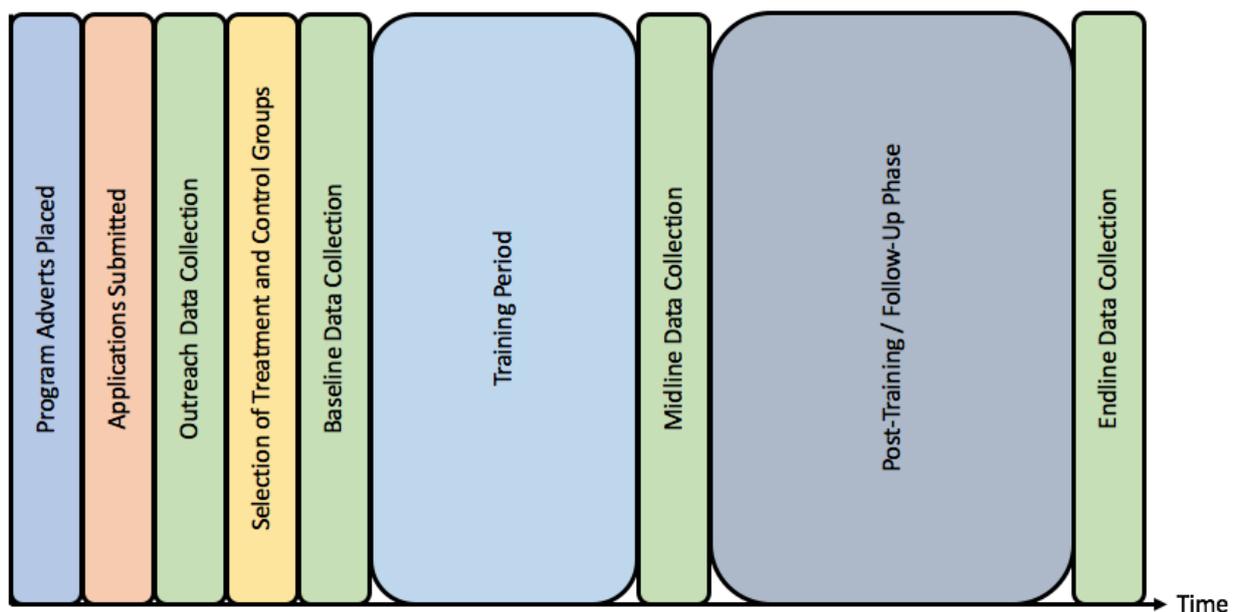


Figure 1: Basic Outline of Training and Data Collection Timeline

d) Sample Size

Data was collected from 376 hosts and refugees in Jordan over the course of two years, starting in June 2018. As mentioned above, data was collected at four points, before youth entered the program (outreach), just as they started the training (baseline), when they finished the training



(midline) and six months post training (end line). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some end line data was not collected from control group cohorts.

e) Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based on our review of the literature and the contexts in Jordan and Lebanon, we developed the following hypotheses related to our overall question of whether vocational training programs would increase stability. With levels of violence in Jordan and Lebanon quite low, particularly between hosts and refugees, we measured stability by examining bias, specifically in-group favoritism among hosts and refugees. We believed this reduction in in-group favoritism would be due to changes in perceptions of economic scarcity and feelings of competition between groups. We believed these biases were a reasonable proxy for stability given such biases, left unchecked, can lead to violence (Halevy, Bornstein and Sagiv 2008; Struch and Schwartz 1989). Specifically, we hypothesized:

- *H1: Participants who are accepted into the program would be more optimistic about their economic prospects than those not accepted.*
- *H2: Participants who complete the program would be more optimistic about their economic prospects than those who did not participate, beyond the effect of H1.*

H1 and H2 focus on whether the vocational training shifts perceptions of economic scarcity.

- *H3: Participating in the program will, temporarily, reduce the employment status of those enrolled compared to those who were not enrolled in the program.*

Since participants in the vocational training would be occupied with courses, they would have less time to find a job, and to work, than those not in the program. This hypothesis is based on other research on vocational training that has found economic benefits from training are delayed (Kurtz, Tesfaye & Wolfe, 2018; Lyall, Zhou and Imai 2019).

- *H4: Participants will, in the longer-term, have improved employment status compared to those not enrolled in the program.*

Related to H3, in the Afghanistan study cited above, those who participated in vocational training had stronger economic outcomes six to nine months post program. We expect similar results here for training participants.

- *H5: Individuals who participate in the program will show reduced bias towards their own group immediately after the training.*
- *H6: Individuals who participate in the program will, beyond the effect observed under H5, reduce their bias favoring their own group.*

H5 and H6 test the main question of the impact evaluation: Does the program change relationships between hosts and refugees? By testing both H5 and H6, we are able to disentangle whether any effects we see are due to the training program itself (H5), due to any economic changes as a result of the program (H6) or both.

Findings

As mentioned, this impact evaluation was conducted in both Jordan and Lebanon. The results below describe findings from Jordan, a full report including Lebanon findings can be found in Annex 1.

1. Optimism and scarcity

In Jordan⁴, it was found that being accepted into a vocational training course does improve economic optimism, but does not improve overall life optimism. The data shows a more positive trend amongst the treatment group. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that this increase in economic and life optimism reduces at midline, where those in the program are not significantly more economically optimistic when compared to the control group.

⁴ [Research was also conducted in Lebanon.](#)



In terms of economic scarcity, slight changes are noticed from baseline to midline. If anything, measures related to economic scarcity worsened, these measures include perceptions around the fairness of salaries and ability to meet current and future needs. This was to be expected, seeing as participants enrolled in a vocational training program are unaware of their financial status, being enrolled sheds light on the reality of the labor market and the jobs available to them.

2. Group Bias

Preferences towards others: results from the Dictator Game indicate there is a difference in how youth behaved based on whether they were paired with someone in their own group versus someone in the other group. Overall levels of generosity do not increase nor decrease amongst treatment group youth, so one cannot say that the training changed perceptions. It is to be noted that amongst that youth in the treatment group give less when partnered with someone within their group (same nationality), indicating less in-group favoritism.

At end-line, participants are less generous overall; however in-group favoritism levels maintain the same. Youth participants end up keeping more for themselves than they did earlier, due to learning the logistics of the game. By end line each has played twice.

Trust: Youth enrolled in the vocational training program are more likely to trust their partner to also make a large investment (i.e., a prosocial behavior) than those in the control group. This did not differ whether people were paired with someone from their own group compared to those from the other group (e.g., Jordanian paired with another Jordanian versus Jordanian paired with a Syrian).

Recommendations

Based on the results and input from field teams, recommendations for both future program design and overall interventions have been derived.

Program Design

These recommendations have been derived with the research data in-mind as well as the Mercy Corps expertise when designing programs around employability for youth.

1. **Recognize the power imbalances between hosts and refugees when designing employment programs.** Organizations need to understand imbalances exist and will continue to exist, although interventions to reduce these imbalances do not need to be incorporated into programs, field teams and any stakeholders involved in the implementation of the program must have prior awareness training in order to best address these issues and avoid their own biases.
2. **Employment programs can increase stability, if used appropriately.** Much research, including from Mercy Corps, has shown that employment programs do not consistently increase stability. Part of the explanation for why employment programs may not increase stability in certain contexts is that mobilization for violence is related to political ideology rather than for primarily economic reasons. Economic scarcity often drives negative attitudes about refugees.
3. **Employment programs need to incorporate interventions that increase demand within the markets.** Research shows that investment in increasing employment opportunities, not just skills, is essential for the sustainability of a program level as well as improvement of overall communities. NGOs' need to play more of a facilitation role, to ensure that support facilities such as training centers are better suited to serve vulnerable groups.
4. **Organizations should explicitly design vocational training programs to reduce bias among hosts and refugees.** Results showed how employment programs reduce bias between hosts and refugees where economic issues are not the primary driver of negative attitudes between groups. The reduction in bias was not as tied to economic gains, and a reduction in bias continues even six months after completing the vocational training course.

Overarching



These recommendations are backed by research data, and should be taken into consideration for future literature and programming.

- 1. Youth give less to groups in similar groups to themselves.** Preferences towards others: results from the Dictator Game indicate there is a difference in how youth behaved based on whether they were paired with someone in their own group versus someone in the other group. Overall levels of generosity do not increase nor decrease amongst treatment group youth, so one cannot say that the training changed perceptions. It is to be noted that amongst that youth in the treatment group give less when partnered with someone within their group (same nationality), indicating less in-group favoritism.
- 2. Need to pair employment programs with interventions that increase demand.** It was noted that investment in increasing employment opportunities, not just skills, is essential for the sustainability of these stability gains. In Lebanon, as the economic crisis hit, we also witnessed a return to previous levels of in-group favoritism. With increases in economic insecurity, inclinations to help “one’s own” as opposed to others is not surprising, but illustrates the precariousness of these results related to social stability without addressing underlying issues related to insecurity.
- 3. Explicitly design vocational training programs to reduce bias among hosts and refugees.** In this study, we also saw in Jordan how an employment program reduced bias between hosts and refugees where economic issues are not the primary driver of negative attitudes between groups. All sessions in both Jordan and Lebanon were mixed between hosts and refugees, so they encouraged contact. In Jordan, we saw that the reduction in bias was not as tied to economic gains, and this reduction in bias appears to continue six months later. Consequently, the reduction in bias is attributable to the training alone. In contrast, in Lebanon we are not able to disentangle the employment effect from the training effect, since the reduction in bias faded when employment opportunities did as well. Other research has shown when vocational programs deliberately pair people from different groups together, the reduction in bias is maintained a year after the program is completed (Scacco and Warren, unpublished). Therefore, we may have seen even greater and more sustainable impact if contact between hosts and refugees were explicitly promoted in the trainings. This may be particularly relevant when the economic situation is fragile, and there is a risk of backlash effects when economic gains fade.
- 4. Recognize the power imbalances between hosts and refugees.** In our analysis, we see some initial trends that much of the reduction in bias was changes in the hosts. Refugees demonstrated little bias to begin with. This is consistent with other research which shows that higher power groups learn more about lower power groups in these types of settings than vice versa. Therefore, targeted activities toward hosts’ communities to reduce bias regarding refugees could enhance these initial results, and again help maintain the results over the long-term. For example, empathy and perspective-taking interventions have been shown to work in Jordan and the US.