



Teaching soft skills to vulnerable youth can accelerate social inclusion in Côte d'Ivoire

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Key messages

- “Soft skills” education under the government’s Civic Action Service for Employment and Development (SCAED) program fosters positive behaviours in at-risk youths.
- The SCAED program is more likely to successfully promote social inclusion than educational scholarships or start-up capital for young entrepreneurs.
- To be more successful, the program should be adapted to better respond to the needs of young at-risk women, many of whom have young children in their care.

High rates of youth unemployment and poverty threaten social recovery from the 2010-11 conflict

While the Côte d'Ivoire is recovering from the post-electoral crisis of 2010-11 in terms of economic growth, the already high rate of unemployment has increased and poverty rates remain high. Young people (ages 14-35) have the highest unemployment rates, and in 2015, over 70% of the poor were 25 years of age or younger.

Poverty and unemployment are linked to social exclusion, which has become a particular problem since the crisis, threatening social cohesion and security in the country. Developing people’s non-cognitive skills, or “soft skills” is particularly important in fragile contexts because these have been shown to improve labour market performance.

In 2014, the Government of Côte d'Ivoire implemented the Civic Action Service for Employment and Development (SCAED). The aim of the service is to foster the social and economic inclusion of vulnerable young people aged 16 to 35.

There is a high demand for this service in the post-conflict circumstances and it is costly. However, there has been little evidence produced as to the effectiveness of the program for increasing the social inclusion of at-risk youth.

What are soft skills?

The definitions of “soft skills” include sociability, self-management, clear communication and meaningful feedbacks, resolving and/or managing conflict, ethics, diversity sensitivity, teamwork skills, problem-solving or critical thinking abilities, customer services competencies, emotional intelligence and leadership skills.

How does the SCAED work?

Beneficiaries are selected from among young Ivorians in great social difficulty who are likely to develop anti-social behaviour and are not employed in a productive activity. Some of the selection criteria include being unemployed, without a diploma or professional qualification, having no income or be living on less than one dollar (US) per day, having a precarious social situation (homeless, in a very poor family, living with non-working friends, etc.), having a criminal record, using drugs, and belonging to a delinquent gang.

The service uses a military model to promote soft skills and rehabilitation.



The project

To address the lack of evidence on the effectiveness of the program, a team of local PEP researchers and government officials undertook a coproduced research project, from 2019 to 2021, to identify and evaluate policies to enforce social inclusion of vulnerable youth in Cote d'Ivoire. The project had two parts:

1. A scientific analysis to assess the impact of the SCAED program on youth at-risk youth behavior.
2. A policy paper analysis to compare potential policy options that can address the factors identified in the scientific work.

The experiment

The project team implemented a randomized control trial (RCT) to assess whether a military-style civic education program with soft-skills training can reduce anti-social behaviours, increase self-esteem and foster positive behaviours (including those that are likely to lead to employment or entrepreneurship).

- The team recruited 700 vulnerable youth from two of the regions most affected by the conflict
 - 250 were randomly selected to participate as the beneficiary group and 450 as the control group.
- Youth in the beneficiary group received three months of civic education and soft skills training as part of a 12-month program that also includes six months of vocational training and a three-month internship.
 - The control group did not receive any education or training through this program. They would be given priority to attend after the end of the research project, if desired.
- The experiment focused on the initial three-months (soft skills training), collecting survey data before and after.
- The team also measured anti-social behaviour and social preference indicators using other lab-validated instruments.

The results from the team's experiment show that the program did reduce crime, drug abuse, alcohol consumption and violent attributes while also increasing altruism, positive reciprocity, and life satisfaction. However it also increased impatience, life dissatisfaction and impulsivity among women beneficiaries, indicating that gender-sensitive programming would be more successful.

To find out more about the research methods and findings, read the full research paper [2022-04](#), published as part of the [PEP working paper series](#).



Photo: USAID



Policy options

The project team then assessed the SCAED program in relation to other policies that Ivorian policymakers may consider as part of government efforts to improve social cohesion, focusing on youth. These options are:

1. **Status quo** (including the SCAED pilot program in two regions)
2. **Provide capital directly to young entrepreneurs**
3. **Encourage at risk-youth to resume education by funding scholarships**
4. **Fund broader participation in citizenship education before providing capital for entrepreneurship** (SCAED program expanded to five areas)

Evaluation of the policy options

	Status Quo	Capital for young entrepreneurs	Scholarships for resuming education	Expanded SCAED program
Advantages /disadvantages	At risk youth will continue to threaten social cohesion and peace in almost all areas	Could reduce poverty if used well but does not address needs of emotionally unstable youths – likely to be unsustainable	Will take at least 2 years to see if it has a positive effect; Precarious conditions of their households may prevent youth from benefitting	Addresses young men's emotional and financial needs, fostering positive behaviours; Needs adapting to work for young women
Evaluation	Likely to exacerbate youth vulnerability	Not sufficient to guarantee success	Not cost-effective	Most promising option for improving social cohesion among Ivorian youth

Conclusions and policy recommendations

The results of the experiment show that the SCAED program is effective in its objectives, at least for young men. Furthermore, the comparative analysis of other potential policies shows how the two-pronged approach of the SCAED program is the most promising for addressing youths' emotional needs, setting them up in a better position for entrepreneurship or employment.

By investing in transferable skills training for at-risk youth, the Ivorian government can improve the social conditions of young people in the country as well as social cohesion.

The project team identified that most of the eligible women for the SCAED program have at least one child from whom they are separated for the program duration; leading eligible candidates to not participate and enrolled beneficiaries to drop out. As well as limiting the potential benefits for young vulnerable women, the team identified this as a key factor in explaining why the program increased negative behaviours in the female beneficiaries.

As such, **the government should consider ways to adapt the SCAED program to take into account the different needs and constraints of young vulnerable women.** Such measures could make this program effective for young women as well as young men, and for the benefit of the wider Ivorian society.



Photo: Albert González Farran / UNAMID

This brief summarises policy analysis outcomes from the project **PIERI-20372**. To find out more about the scientific research methods and findings, read the full research paper **No. 2022-04**, published as part of the **PEP working paper series**.

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