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Youth and Violent Extremism*

KEY MESSAGES

- Holding "radical" views does not necessarily lead to violent extremist behaviour. Many critical and creative thinkers who have contributed positively to societal development, and continue to do so, may be considered radical. However, when force is used to impose one's divergent views, and infringes on the rights of others, it may be considered violent extremist behaviour.

- The various forms of violence are interrelated; cultures of violence are the breeding grounds for different forms of violent extremist behaviour including terrorism.

- The widespread violence in Kenyan educational institutions is sympto-matic of a bigger problem in society and provides a fertile platform for conversion of young people, male and females, into violent extremists.

- Preventive measures are needed to break the inter-generational trans-mission of values that fosters violence. Reactive, hard-power exclusionary strategies will only serve to alienate and criminalize young people instead of including, involving and empowering them.

- The operationalization of the education and capacity development and training pillars identified in the National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism needs to be prioritized and strengthened, and the pillars need to be rolled out not only at the national level but also at the county and local levels.

- While programmes providing formal and informal employment opportu-nities for youth are essential, these must be accompanied by develop-ment of not only skills but also posi-tive, humanistic values embedded in the Kenyan Constitution and international human rights treaties, laws and policies.

1. Introduction

Violent extremism on the African continent claimed the lives of over 30,000 people between 2011 and 2016, injuring countless others and displacing millions of people (Slachmuijlder, 2017). While violent extremism is not necessarily confined to any age, gender, group or community, its public face has often been youthful as demonstrated by recruits into Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab. In regions where there are large youth cohorts, jihadism tends to be associated with men under the age of 25 (UNDP, 2016). Young people are particularly vulnerable to the messages and narratives of violent extremism and terrorist organizations. In the Kenyan coast, for example, some violent extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab recruit unemployed youth and with offers of high financial benefits (Scofield's Associates, 2017). Yet, it is often forgotten that only a small fraction of youth actively participate in violent extremist behaviour and that the vast majority are not involved in terrorist acts. While the potential of young people for creating peace and countering violent extremism is generally recognized, this remains at the rhetorical level with little effort to involve them actively in decision-making for countering violent extremism (UNDP, 2017).

Kenya has a youthful population with 6 in every 10 individuals being below the age of 24 (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Young women and men between the ages of 15 and 30 constitute one-third of the population. The socio-cultural, economic, political and environmental contexts within which they live, however, are both complex and challenging. Among the challenges they are confronted with is the threat of violent extremism, whether as victims or perpetrators, or both. According to one recent study, young Kenyans between the ages of 9 and 25 are the most vulnerable to recruitment into violent groups. The same study notes that although boys are the most frequently targeted, girls are increasingly getting involved, with the most targeted levels being secondary and upper primary students (Ministry of Education, 2017).

The Kwale County Plan for Countering Violent Extremism (County Government of Kwale, 2017) notes the recruitment of local youth into Al-Shabaab, and their role in terrorist acts against elders and businesses. Stakeholder analysis describes them as "frontline victims and perpetrators of the problem" with "high capacity" but "low motivation" to "bring about change". The Plan singles out youth as targets of anticipatory actions but does not go far enough to view them as partners, drawing upon their

insights and talents to develop interventions that would effectively prevent and counter violent extremism and bring about positive and sustainable changes in their communities. Search for Common Ground attributes the exclusion of youth from decision-making around issues of violent extremism to either "unwillingness or uncertainty on how to engage" them.

2. Defining Radicalization, Terrorism and Violent Extremism

Although the term is used in everyday discourse, there is no common definition of violent extremism; it is often used interchangeably with terrorism and linked to radicalization. There is also some confusion between the concepts of **countering violent extremism** (CVE), **preventing violent extremism** (PVE) and **countering terrorism**. Over the past two decades, the international community has sought to address violent extremism primarily within the context of **security-based counter-terrorism measures** adopted to **"counter"** (CVE) the threat posed by terrorist groups.

This kind of conceptualization can be problematic. First, it cloaks the fact that violent extremist behaviour is complex and not only confined to political or religious ideologies. In Kenya, violent extremism has manifested itself in repeated incidents of post-election violence in 1992, 1997 and 2007/8; acts of terrorism (the most significant cases experienced being the terrorist attacks in April 2015 at Garissa University, in September 2013 at the Westgate Mall, and in August 1998 at the American Embassy); and violence perpetrated by organized criminal gangs in various parts of the country. In addition, school-based violence, including arson and destruction of property, is widespread. Some reports link criminal gangs both to politicians and to school violence.

Second, it often leads to a response to violent extremism and terrorism based on security-focused action, encouraging reactive, military-type measures as opposed to a preventive approach, often resulting in human rights abuses of individuals and communities perceived to be "terrorists" and/or "radicals". It reinforces profiling and labelling of particular segments of the population along ethnic and religious lines, resulting in possible punishment of entire religious or ethnic communities for the real or perceived criminal actions of a few individuals and may lead to serious violations of their human rights (Mutahi, 2016) and tends to fuel the problem (Allison, 2015). In a baseline study commissioned by the Search for Common Ground in 2016, 65 per cent of the respondents perceived the relationship between the police and the community to be bad, fanned by the "loss of life and property, alleged incitement to violence by religious leaders, death from police actions; and lack of cooperation [...]" (Scofield's Associates, 2017).

In a survey of Al-Shabaab fighters in Kenya, 65 per cent of the respondents said they joined the terrorist group as a reaction to the Government's counter-terror strategy, with 97 per cent perceiving their religion to be under physical or ideological threat. Almost half viewed the government as their enemy (Institute of Economics and Peace, 2017).

Perceptions are important in fuelling violent extremist behaviour. Research findings and media reports reveal a significant lack of trust between communities and law enforcement institutions (Villa-Vicencio, Buchanan-Clarke and Humphrey, 2016). A 2017 study undertaken in Mombasa by the Centre for Development and Peace confirmed the 2016 baseline findings cited above (Katessey Ville Services, 2017). They found that only a minority of sampled young women trusted the police. Similarly, a number of research participants in another study, conducted by Jaslika Consulting in Mombasa and Kwale, confirming this, went further to link this lack of trust to perceived police atrocities and abuse of human rights as a key factor driving the youth to violent extremism (Wamahiu, 2017). The use of security responses, sometimes described as "hard power" approaches by the Kenyan government to deal with the challenges, appears to have widened the trust gap and aggravated the problem.

Both the security apparatus and public in general are complicit in this; the negative perceptions are transmitted through the conventional media by sensational and biased reporting, and fanned further by the social media. Such responses address the symptoms and not the underlying drivers of the problem.

Third, it ignores the fact that holding "radical" views does not necessarily lead to violent extremist behaviour. Many young people and adolescents go through a phase in their life where their thinking may diverge significantly from the mainstream, dominant societal ideologies. Their views may challenge societal norms and perceived inequalities and injustices in society and within their families, but these may be signs that they are reflective, independent thinkers and possess critical thinking skills. How authority figures at home, in the community and the in government respond to their "radical" views will determine whether they will make the jump from critical thinkers to violent extremists.

However, more recently, there has been a shift towards a more comprehensive approach that encompasses not only essential security-based counter-terrorism measures but also systematic **preventive steps** (PVE) to address the factors that make individuals join violent extremist groups.

3. The Underlying Factors of Violent Extremism

The underlying drivers of violent extremism include socio-economic, psychological and institutional factors. Specialists commonly group the factors that contribute to violent extremism into two categories:

Push Factors, such as: marginalization, inequality, discrimination, persecution, or the perception thereof; limited access to quality and relevant education; the denial of rights and civil liberties; and other environmental, historical and socioeconomic grievances.

Pull Factors, that nurture the appeal of violent extremism, for example: the existence of well-organized violent extremist groups with compelling discourses and effective programmes that are providing services, revenue and/or employment in exchange for membership. Groups can also lure new members by providing outlets for grievances and promise of adventure and freedom. Furthermore, these groups appear to offer spiritual comfort, "a place to belong", a supportive social network and are "cool".

Others also include what are termed catalytic factors. **Catalytic factors** are those that facilitate the process, including the innate adolescent factors, media and the Internet (Ministry of Education, 2017). Among the catalytic factors, one may also add modelling of negative values by significant others, like parents, teachers and political leaders. Negative values in this context include discrimination, intolerance, and dishonesty, among others (Wamahiu, 2017) (Wamahiu, 2015).

4. The PVE Strategy

The Kenya Government National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism, launched in 2016, recognizes the complexity of the challenges in dealing with violent extremism. However, while emphasizing the "hard power" approach, it gives a small window to the use of prevention as a strategy, albeit implicitly, in what it identifies as its "work pillars". Although it does not expressly mention prevention as a strategy, among the six work pillars, at least four may be considered to be preventive. These are the *education, political, religious/ideological and training/capacity development* pillars.

The United Nations Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism describes violent extremism as "an affront to the purposes and principles of the United Nations. It undermines peace and security, human rights and sustainable development", noting that "no country or region is immune from its [negative] impacts" (United Nations, 2015). It calls upon the United Nations Member States to address the conditions conducive to the spread of violent extremism, including by empowering youth, and seeking input in the development of national plans from youth, families, women, religious, cultural and education leaders, and all other concerned groups of civil society, and promoting social inclusion and cohesion. In its preamble, Security Council Resolution 1624 (2005) stresses "the importance of the role of the media, civil and religious society, the business community and educational institutions" in efforts to enhance dialogue and broaden understanding, in promoting tolerance and coexistence, and in fostering an environment that is not conducive to incitement of terrorism and other forms of violent terrorism (United Nations, 2005). According to Ban Ki-moon, the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, "the creation of open, equitable, inclusive and pluralist societies, based on the *full respect of human rights* [emphasis added] and with economic opportunities for all, represents the most tangible and meaningful alternative to violent extremism and the most promising strategy for rendering it unattractive" (United Nations, 2015).

5. A Human Rights Perspective

This concept note builds on the human rights perspective as outlined above, rejecting a trajectory that equates radicalization with terrorism. Following Davies (2008), radical-iza¬tion is taken to be the process or the actions through which an individual's opinions and behaviour become significantly different from those of the people around him or her. Holding radical views of itself is not harmful but when force is used to impose those views it violates the rights of others. Use of physical force, with or without accompanying violent ideological propaganda, may be considered to be violent extremist behaviour. Terrorism is one outcome of this process but not the only one.

Violent extremism in the present context is defined as "the choice individuals make to use or support violence to advance a cause based on exclusionary group identities [emphasis added]. The particular identity of the perpetrator of violence does not determine what constitutes violent extremism, nor does the nature of the ideology, even if many may consider that ideology [to be] radical. Rather, violent extremism relates to an individual['s] or group's violent advancement of an exclusionary ideology, which seeks to eliminate the 'other' group, culture, or identity" (Slachmuijlder, 2017). The Kwale County Plan for Countering Violent Extremism (2017) calls for incorporating prevention strategies that are consistent with respect for human rights, to the more traditional security approaches to dealing with Violent Extremism. The human rights approaches to countering (or preventing) violent extremism build on values and principles of impartiality, non-discrimin-ation, inclusion, tolerance, peace, social justice and respect for diversity. Framed within a "whole society" and participatory design, they recognize that there is no "one shoe fits all" solution to violent extremism, and designing programmes and projects based on an understanding of the possible differences and social, cultural, economic contexts of particular communities and demographics is essential for longer term and sustainable outcomes.

The Global Terrorism Index 2017 indicates a reduction in global deaths caused by terrorism. Available data shows that Kenya was among the 10 countries globally that experienced

a reduction in deaths due to terrorist attacks between 2015 and 2016. There is no room for complacency, however. The reduction in terrorist related deaths is attributable to a change in strategy by the Al-Shabaab, which took a decision to focus more on Somalia than Kenya. As a country, Kenya continues to be considered among those suffering high impact of terrorism and is ranked 22nd in the Terrorism Index globally (Institute of Economics and Peace, 2017).

The literature continues to point to youths as being highly susceptible to the messages of violent extremists and terrorist organizations, boys more so than girls but the latter rapidly increasing in number. The wide-spread perception of law enforcement as hostile to young people means, unfortunately, that law enforcement cannot seek their support to prevent or counter violent extremist narratives and messages. The law enforcement agents too, on their part, tend to perceive the youth as perpetrators of violent extremism and collaborators of extremist groups, handling them with force rather than a "soft" approach consistent with human rights values and principles. International experience indicates that "conciliatory actions, which reward non-terrorist behaviour of the population from which terror groups originate, are more effective at bringing about an end to terrorist activity than repressive measures" (Institute of Economics and Peace, 2017). This is why the United Nations Secretary-General, in his report to the General Assembly on the Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, calls for the harnessing of the "idealism, creativity and energy of young people and others who feel disenfranchised", and viewing them as assets who "must be empowered to make a constructive contribution to the political and economic development of their societies and nations" (United Nations, 2015).

6. Conclusion

- Addressing the drivers of violent extremism effectively and sustainably requires multi-disciplinary, multi-sectoral and multi-pronged approaches; it requires making space for creativity and critical thinking while practising values that promote our shared humanity.

- In practical terms, this means engaging in stronger public sector partnerships and involving non-state actors and other key stakeholders, including the youth, at the national and county levels, in finding solutions to exclusion, discrimination, inequities and social injustice.

- It also means supporting a wide array of interventions that include action, research and capacity-development in addition to providing quality and inclusive education and access to basic health and other services for all in the most excluded and marginalized communities as well as creating income-generating opportunities for young people.

- Capacity development should aim at changing mind sets, not only of the young people but also of those in positions of authority. Capacity development of youth, through community youth groups and non-formal education fora, should focus on engaging their minds constructively, opening their eyes to possibilities and creative opportunities, allowing them to think outside the box. The older people, especially those in authority, should be orientated to enhancing their communica-tion skills and providing the youth with the space for exploration and decision-making.

- There are many initiatives spearheaded by civil society organizations but little is known about them in the public domain. Even less known is their quality and impact. As a first step, therefore, there is a need for comprehensively mapping and categorizing these initiatives. Some of these initiatives explicitly address the challenges of radicalization and violent extremism. The connection between violent extremism and other initiatives addressing issues like sexual and gender-based violence, school-based violence including corporal punishment, home-based violence and child abuse, are rarely drawn. More detailed documentation and impact assessment of the promising initiatives should follow highlighting good practices and lessons learned.

What does AFICS-Kenya have to offer?

Comprising professionals formerly with the UN, AFICS-Kenya experts have a wealth of knowledge and rich experience at both the national and international levels. These diverse experts with different but complementary skills, knowledge and experiences are well-positioned to design and support implementation of programmes and services to address the complexity of challenges posed by violent extremism in the country.

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