Youth and Countering Violent Extremism in Africa

The rise in terrorism and violent extremism in Africa has created severe security threats resulting in death, destruction and instability in the countries and regions where Violent Extremist Groups (VEGs) operate. Meanwhile, Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) in Africa remain a challenge related to a lack of proper understanding of the phenomena. A key aspect of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) research is youth engagement in violent extremism mainly on policies and practices related to Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) in the direction of creating safe spaces and sustainable opportunities for youth participation in PCVE.

1. SUMMARY

Radicalisation among the youth has been increasing in Africa leading to Violent Extremism (VE) and terrorist attacks amplifying structural problems and complicating policy responses. Yet, the world has learned very little in terms of policy implications of research; overall, the evidence suggests a policy panic that is becoming apparent in most global level discussions on youth. Most state-led initiatives on youth are largely non-functional, non-participatory, short- lived or driven by the calculation of immediate political gains. Addressing these challenges requires a wide range of actions at national, local and community levels, including strengthening communities' efforts to resist radicalisation and extremism. This also means national Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) policies need to place emphasis on strengthening youth feelings of

inclusion. As key stakeholders, women need to be involved and included at all levels in shaping policy to address VE. Research findings on youth and violent extremism, part of IDRC's pan-African initiative on understanding youth experiences with violence and exclusion and injustice in Africa, have found and generated new thinking about interventions and strategies for youth to be included in PCVE. It is suggested that African countries would probably be more successful if they were to adopt a multi-level engagement, viewing and engaging the youth as partners, recognising human-rights approach, ensuring a multi-stakeholder, multi-pronged and holistic approach focusing on "soft interventions" including citizen participation, working with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and other non-state actors, investing in social cohesion, the need to nurture and empower the youth and many others. This synthesis brief highlights and shares the original insights particularly new research findings from cohorts including solutions and recommendations emerging from the broader literature and ongoing debates. This would help devising more appropriate policies to prevent and counter youth engagement in VE.

2. THE PROBLEM

Radicalisation and violent extremism have been on the rise with an intensification of youth indoctrination to join violent extremist groups. Women's involvement in violent extremist groups seems to have expanded in recent years making

them integral to many aspects of the VEG's outreach. The Lake Chad Basin and the Sahel Region have recently become flashpoints for VEGs. Eastern Africa, particularly the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) region, remained a theatre for the 'war on terror' while member states belong to the most youthful countries in the continent and home to VEGs. Youth bulge, in addition to various micro- and macro-level factors, such as socioeconomic challenges and marginalisation; have contributed to the increase in youths' vulnerability to extremist groups. Young people have often been used in political activities funded by the political parties, particularly to perpetrate violence during elections, while being excluded from the processes that determine their lives and livelihoods. Many parts of the continent continue to be attractive to international and local violent extremist and jihadist groups, which could become parasitic on local armed conflicts, seizing upon ideological dimensions to local grievances.

Radicalisation and Violent Extremism (VE) are not new to Africa but have evolved over the last two decade in more significant ways. Yet, the world has learned very little interms of building a strong and resilient community to resist youth engagement in violent extremism and 'terrorism'. There is clear gap in understanding the range of factors that influence how and why young people perceive, engage and address violence, criminality, exclusion, and injustice in given contexts, in particular the resources and strategies they use to transform their situations. The underpinning policies are often debated, designed, and implemented based on norms and assumptions rather than research findings. The study found that various policies/practices concerning PCVE interventions in the perspective of youth inclusivity do not entirely include youth. Many youths are not aware of policies, but also initiatives that concern them do not materialise due to poor planning of those programmes. They fall short of enabling a wide range of stakeholders to better address African youth engagement with violence in general and situations of violent extremism. The overall conclusion is that there are serious gaps in state institutions and technical capacity for CVE.

This reflects the reality that there is lack of clarity within Africa and the international community in addressing issues of youth and VE in a coherent and comprehensive manner.

3. RESEARCH FOCUS

Launched in 2017, IDRC's pan-African initiative on *Understanding and Addressing Youth Experiences with Violence, Exclusion and Injustice* in Africa has supported 14 research projects in 12 African countries. This brief is concerned with selected research products and synthesis reports on the theme: youth and violent extremism and the interventions and strategies for youth to be included in PCVE. The research reports include:

1. Kenya-Uganda: Youth Inclusive Mechanisms for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in the IGAD Region: Case study of Kenya and Uganda. The overall research question for the study was, "to what extent were mechanisms for preventing and countering violent extremism in the IGAD region youth inclusive?" The study has identified attempts what has worked, what has not and why, in PCVE in the IGAD region, focusing specifically on Kenya and Uganda.

2. Tunisia: Reinforcing youth deradicalisation through inclusion. Tunisia had one of the largest contingents of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) in Iraq, Syria, and Libya, and hence faced a large influx of returning foreign fighters. The research establishes the centrality of inclusion in deradicalisation programmes in post-revolution Tunisia (2011 and afterwards). This is supplemented by a critique of state PCVE policies, including policies on reintegration and inclusion of returned 'foreign fighters', with reference once again to Kenya and Uganda on the one hand and Tunisia on the other. The studies see key weaknesses with the 'hard security' approaches that characterise current state policies and make a case for both a wider spectrum of initiatives and greater involvement by non-state actors (civil society and community associations in particular) in the design and implementation of

PCVE approaches. A study on negotiating the space of youth amid growing insecurities: lessons from Tanzania and Kenya also provides actual examples of instances where informal youth groups and associations have played a positive role in the reintegration and inclusion of returned fighters, in contexts where state policies and initiatives had failed (aggravating rather than solving conflict).

3. Mali and Niger: This research in the Mopti and Ségou regions of Mali and the Diffa region of Niger focuses on promoting a better understanding of the factors of engagement and resilience of young women to VEGs in the two regions. Examines the choices women make to use or support violence to advance a cause in two Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) countries (Mali and Niger), complemented by analysis on gender and violent extremism in two countries from the IGAD region (Kenya and Uganda). Both studies argue that women are not just 'victims' but also perpetrators with active roles in these organisations; the research finds that women can also join willingly and play a range of roles in these groups. From Mali to Somalia, women's support, both passive and active, has contributed to VEGs endurance.

This synthesis brief is consolidated by additional inputs. These include the African Security Sector Network (ASSN) Webinar report on "Youth and Violent Extremism: Bringing New Voices to the Debate", a distinct analysis (including synthesis report) of the gender dimensions of CVE in West and Eastern Africa and extracts from the disparate literature and broader debate on terrorism and violent extremism in the Horn. The synthesis brief integrates the various research and synthesis reports to frame approaches to PCVE.

A. SUGGESTIONS

1. Engage and consult the youth

Many state-led initiatives on youth are largely non-functional, non-participatory, short-lived or driven by the calculation of immediate political gains. The youth

are not consulted on matters that affect them. Women make decisions to join armed organisations for much the same reasons as men but either they are not included in conventional understandings of violent extremism, or when they are included in policy responses, they are often perceived merely as victims. It is known that peacebuilders should strive to integrate gender-sensitive perspective into all facets of their CVE work as well as to analyse their programme design and implementation. As strategic resources to Violent Extremist Groups (VEGs), women need to be part of gender-sensitive Demilitarisation, Demobilisation, Reintegration (DDR) and programmes reinforcing their resilience factors at the local level. Women's roles tend to be poorly understood, in large part because their views are rarely aired. Making sure women are listened to and participate in CVE initiatives, particularly through community level associations, by extension mainstreaming gender in PCVE programming at societal level. This will provide a safety net for radicalised and disengaged individuals, which will increase the chances of their return, deradicalisation, and reintegration.

The Tunisian study expands **reintegration** in terms of multi-layered and wider approaches to inclusion. It also contributes new definitions to the debate on deradicalisation versus disengagement. The term 'disengaged' is preferred to 'deradicalised' as disengagement means cessation of involvement in violent acts, and not necessarily from extremist ideologies. The study is critical of the existing security-based approach, which often incarcerates returnees or places them under strict judicial surveillance, and advocates replacing this with a strategy of inclusion built around six components (Social Acceptance, Civic Engagement, Political Representation, Religious Acceptance, Education, and Employment). This strategy also calls for a wider role for non-stated actors (civil society and community organisations in particular) if it is to be successful. To support this, **inclusion** and **community approach** as transversal issues are highlighted in all the studies. Civil society and community/youth networks may succeed where

states fail, as the intriguing example of the Bongwe Youth Network in Kwale, Kenya, demonstrates with returnees from al-Shabaab. Community engagement therefore requires building trust between officials and community members to establish a relationship of collaboration. Often grassroots are not about being represented, but about participation and channelling the different voices within society. Community dialogue, platforms for inclusiveness within the society reduce exclusion that in turn can assist directly in P/CVE. Tunisia demonstrates social acceptability especially from their local community, and the need to invest in social cohesion, as an important factor for youth shifting from being radicalised to disengaged.

2. Include the informal sector

Interventions appear to be largely focused on the formal sector, and customary actors are not engaged fully, despite studies that show that these actors are often more trusted in African contexts. This notwithstanding, their standing in society, and the levels of trust they enjoy suggests that they should also be included in policy interventions.

3. Seek to understand violence as part of resilience

Addressing root causes requires viewing youth engagement in violence as a form of resilience. Despite the framing that violence is negative and should be prevented young people engage in it by joining VEGs to survive. The youth mainly women navigate a terrain where the state is either absent or predatory and they make choices that reflect their need to survive. At least start by recognising the challenge.

4. Be wary of hard security approaches

All research cohorts seem to point to the use of 'soft interventions', rather than punishment, to reduce youths' engagement in violence. All research outcomes advocate replacing this with a strategy of inclusion. To the extent that security actors have a role in PCVE interrogating the link between VE and security sector reform becomes critical.

5. Leverage non-state actors, self-help organisations and local resources

The non-state actors' interventions have more grip on youth and their communities than the state-led interventions despite the political will and commitment to PCVE. There is evidence on the ground that youth networks have helped reduce the level of radicalisation. Self-help organisations in Tanzania and Kenya present instances where informal youth groups and associations play a positive role in the reintegration and inclusion of returned fighters, in contexts where state policies and initiatives had failed. Looking at the two contexts in Mwanza (Tanzania) and Kwale (Kenya), the *Boda Boda* (motorcycle taxi) associations in Mwanza have become a lot more sustainable because the resources that support their activities are sourced internally and at the local level due to the growing level of positive acceptance that they are gaining from their communities. Compared to the Mwanza youth associations, the Kwale networks are much less sustainable because their activities largely depend on resources coming from donors despite the government's recognition of some of their activities. Therefore, in the absence of donor support, these networks could easily falter and face challenges collaborating with the security authorities, who might resume their prior perception of these youth networks as terror threats. There is a need to locally support the sustainability of youth in PCVE.

6. Move away from ad hoc budgetary arrangements

Most PCVE programmes are ad hoc and dependent on external funding from states and groups that may not fully understand the local contexts or may be limited in their attention and level of support. Dependence on donor support can be evanescent. The study advice national governments to move away from ad hoc programmes, with CVE becoming a foundational part of national action plans with dedicated budgets and monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

7. Fix the communication gap

Global and regional PCVE instruments are there, but there is lack of awareness of these strategies at the national and local level. Other problems include lack of clear communication. Conversely, global instruments and players need to be aware of the local dynamics of policy interventions.

8. Apply intersectionality

Governments and wider policy community need to stop imagining that youth are homogenous, and instead design programmes and interventions that are tailored to the specific range of experiences.

9. Coordinate and integrate

State and non-state actors have been operating in silos. Indeed, the study recommends an all-government and all-community approach to preventing and countering violent extremism that is context-specific, gender-sensitive, multi-layered, and multi-pronged. Hence, multi-layered engagement become critical.

10. Rebalance global and local logics

The global logic needs to take a step back and look again at the local realities. Nonetheless, framing issues as an outcome of local level choices, rather than viewing them as responses to grievances grounded in perceptions of injustices and inequities diverts attention from questioning global unequal power relations, and deep-rooted inequalities stemming from the adoption of neo-liberal precepts to both the organisation of the economy and the institutions of governance and was then imposed on the rest of the world and obviates solutions that call for deep-rooted structural change.

D. AREAS OF FURTHER INVESTIGATION

The project has some powerfully provocative analysis and recommendations for further research which are important and obviously cannot be ignored.

The studies recommend an all-government and all-community approach to preventing and countering violent extremism that is context-specific, gender-sensitive, multi-layered, and multi-pronged. But as the case studies of Kenya and Uganda show understanding the extent to which policy initiatives and interventions address issues of youth marginalisation and exclusion (with particular focus on structural barriers), and the extent to which progress has been made, or not, is at a nascent stage. P/CVE solutions emphasise localised programmes, driven by local actors. There are several cases where civil society and community/youth networks may achieve more than the state in their interventions. But how such initiatives will address structural factors such as development, governance and justice that may be associated with violent extremism in that locality remains to be seen, as the case of Kenya illustrates. Further, interventions by state and non-state actors to prevent or counter youth from violent extremism have been understudied and undocumented. Due diligence is required in both areas.

Job and employment creation schemes have dominated policy and programmatic responses to youth and violent extremism in Africa. However, the theoretical and empirical case for using youth employment programmes as the exclusive tool for reducing violence has been under researched. In other words, the extent to which these programmes have succeeded in preventing and countering violent extremism has not been well documented.

There is a dearth of gender analysis, and the different roles women play in violent extremism. There is a need to acknowledge this fact and seek to better understand women's role in VGEs and insurgency movements. Data on the intersections between broader aspects of migration and violent extremism is however scarce, making it difficult to make necessary robust recommendations. Be attentive to the linkages between VE and criminality. The political economy of VEGs suggests strong ties with criminality. Needs further investigation by researchers. Conversely, understanding the extent

to which structural violence of the state feeds into youth engagement remains inadequate.

While discussing Violent Extremism (VE) it is helpful to explore transnational themes such as: VE and insurgency; VE and inter-state conflicts (such as the role of Sudan with the Lord's Resistance Army/LRA) or Eritrea with rebel groups in the Horn including Islamist insurgencies in Somalia); VE and criminality as clearly manifested in the Sahel, and most importantly in the Ugandan case is VE and alienation. Examples of this include VEGs and even Al-Qaida's recruitment among Kenyan Muslims, Boko Haram in northern Nigeria, LRA support (or lack thereof) in N. Uganda. This will strengthen the case for academics and researchers to rethink (if they have not already begun) their methodology of conducting research about youth and VEGs. Be aware, there is currently little academic research on violent extremism from research institutes and think-tanks. This calls for more CVE research, dissemination, the sharing of best practices and research methodologies, and lessons learned.

RIGHTS AND PERMISSIONS

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