

REFRAMING THE ‘COUNTERTERRORISM’ DEBATE: WHAT ‘VIOLENT EXTREMISM’ AND ‘RADICALIZATION’ MEAN FOR DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, counter-violent extremism (CVE) programmes have emerged alongside global and national anti-terrorism efforts to address the roots of extremist violence. Such programmes are often designed and implemented by, or are otherwise affiliated with, the same actors engaged in anti-terrorism efforts—with mixed success. Development actors are affected by both emergent extremism and the policy responses to it, and the actors have also engaged in work related to these processes. This brief considers the role that development actors can and should play in the prevention of extremist violence and radicalization.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The use of labels such as ‘radicalization’ and ‘violent extremism’ can encourage further radicalization by implying unfounded connections between radical thought (which can be progressive or liberal) and terrorism. These labels often rely on the identification of threats posed by ‘outsider’ groups and facilitate entrenchment of ‘us vs. them’ mentalities. Labelling can also inhibit development and conflict resolution. The US Patriot Act is an example of legislation that used an unconstructive ‘terrorist’ label to identify individuals and groups to whom it applied. Often these individuals and groups were key stakeholders, who were denied the possibility of participating in dialogue, mediation and other conflict resolution efforts.

There are as many drivers of radicalization and extremism as there are affected communities. However, several common drivers emerge in spite of contextual differences. These include (social, political, economic) exclusion and marginalization, real or perceived religious differences, security responses perceived as being disproportionate to the scale of a threat or inappropriate relative to the nature of a threat, external ideologies and institutional factors. The latter bear heavily on the formulation and execution of CVE responses and include the strength of political structures, the extent of institutional legitimacy, the role and size of the security apparatus (including the military), the respective mandates of local and elite authorities and the relationship between the state and the perpetrators of extremist violence.

The lack of conceptual clarity on the relationship between CVE and peacebuilding and development is problematic. On one hand, it has led to mission creep and funding competition between the three disciplines. On the other hand, the failure to clearly define each in relation to the others has contributed to siloed approaches that disregard the role of violent extremism in broader conflict systems. International actors continue to be important sources of funding and support for CVE, peacebuilding and development, but their interventions have positive and negative consequences on the local conflict dynamics. One example of this trend is the role of external actors in Nigerian counter-insurgency interventions, where bilateral assistance has concentrated on support for the Nige-



rian military. By contrast, EU assistance has been more focused on people-oriented development interventions, including investment in basic education and rehabilitation of displaced persons.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. CVE development interventions should address conflict drivers rather than symptoms.

- Conflict drivers are contextual, often localized and interrelated. CVE responses need to reflect this complexity, giving adequate consideration to the role of historical legacies, inter-group dynamics and state complicity, while simultaneously working towards response models that recognize commonalities across contexts and establish best practices.

2. The international community must be more conscious of the negative effects of labelling and framing.

- The use of labels that reduce the potential for constructive dialogue, mediation and conflict management is counterproductive. Moreover, their use (and abuse) can have severe consequences for the operations of interlocutors, activists and humanitarian organizations.
- External actors should be more self-critical with regard to CVE strategies underpinned by values promotion.
- It could be useful to reframe CVE in terms of conflict transformation and peacebuilding to encourage more comprehensive responses.

3. Policymakers should work to enhance coordination between CVE, development and peacebuilding strategies.

- Actors from relevant disciplines should have a platform to discuss conflict drivers, response alternatives and their implications, and desired outcomes. An ongoing dialogue between these communities would enable better coordination and promote consensus building on desired outcomes and the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders.

4. International actors should maximize local capacity in CVE responses.

- Funders should increase investments in approaches that empower local communities and civil society organizations to engage in CVE activities, peace education and the development of counter-narratives.
- CVE efforts should be better aligned with the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda and should recognize that women and women's groups at the local, national and regional levels are key actors in CVE responses, including prevention efforts. In this regard, all CVE efforts should be gender sensitive.

5. Broaden the spectrum of CVE initiatives to include more prevention and rehabilitation activities.

- Activities that seek to improve governance, rule of law, education, public health and economic development can reduce fragility and minimize the conflict drivers that enable violent extremism to take hold. Together with peacebuilding activities, development initiatives function as powerful preventative measures.
- Means of rehabilitating and reintegrating individuals who have been engaged in violent extremism are under-investigated and under-resourced. Greater focus should be given to understanding how to prevent these returnees from re-engaging in violent extremism, spreading violent ideologies and participating in recruitment.

