

PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM THROUGH PEACEBUILDING

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OVERVIEW

In contrast to more reactive, state-centric security responses to the phenomenon of violent extremism, peacebuilders have tended to stress interventions that mitigate root causes earlier in the conflict cycle, as well as structural factors that can produce and reproduce vulnerabilities to recruitment. However, the field of peacebuilding and violent extremism is relatively understudied and more research, analysis and sharing of practice is required. This session aimed to explore the effectiveness of peacebuilding interventions in this regard, examining specific examples of interventions explicitly designed to address violent extremism. It drew on the participating practitioner-experts' important insights into what has been and can be effective in different contexts. In order to hone in on the concrete practicalities of implementation, conceptual questions related to definitions, metrics and theories of change were addressed in an earlier workshop. Participants highlighted country cases from Nigeria, Pakistan, Morocco and Kenya, and brought their regional perspectives to the debate.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

While it is clear that both problems and solutions are highly context-specific, a number of common threads were drawn across cases in relation to violent extremism. Among these, grievances against the state were identified as an important cross-cutting driver of violent extremism at the group level. That structural transformation of the violence cycle often requires governance problems and abuses by state actors to be addressed was implicit in many of the cases. Furthermore, each of the effective interventions presented by session discussants: (a) provided a holistic or multi-sectoral response that included different segments of society, such as women, religious leaders, youth and law enforcement; and (b) were either community-driven or community-led. Although further research is needed to assess their effectiveness across contexts and over time, the cases presented during the session provide peacebuilders with several tools and approaches that show early indications of success. Chief among these are conflict resolution capacity building, media education and training on the deconstruction of stereotypes and the creation of safe spaces for dialogue between communities and law enforcement.

The session discussion also provided a number of insights into ineffective practices and approaches. For example, interventions that target or securitize specific communities have been generally unsuccessful as they tend to upset social cohesion and generate grievances. This was the case with the Kenya Transition Initiatives, which only targeted members of the Somali diaspora. Interventions that focus exclusively on religious ideology (e.g. 'good' Islam versus 'bad' Islam) have also achieved relatively low levels of success. Discussants attributed the failure of the latter to the lack of credibility of the implementing organizations as faith arbiters or the perception that the intervention was being instrumentalized to further a particular political agenda. Because of their do-no-harm perspective, peacebuilders may be relatively more aware of these sensitivities than other types of intervention agents, such as military personnel.



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Interventions implemented by civil society organizations (CSOs) have been most successful where they have long-standing ties to the community and understand the local social and political context, which increases their legitimacy. For example, one discussant presented a programme from northern Nigeria in which women's groups collaborated with local government and Islamic leaders to develop counter-narratives to those propagated by Boko Haram. Collectively, the three stakeholders implemented training and radio programmes to help community members overcome the stigma associated with secular education. Their initiative resulted in a substantial increase in public primary school enrollment. Donors and implementing agencies should partner with CSOs to design and implement Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) programmes in vulnerable communities to ensure that interventions are suitable to the local context and responsive to community needs and concerns.

Without diminishing the work of women peacebuilders already engaged in PVE, participants observed that the potential of women PVE agents remains largely untapped in countries with high levels of gender inequality. They recommended that sustainable prevention strategies should consider how to empower women with the knowledge, skills and authority required for them to take on a larger role as peace and security actors. However, discussants cautioned against framing the gender dimensions of violent extremism in binary terms. Women and girls have actively participated in and supported violent extremism and are increasingly being recruited by extremist organizations. Practitioners and policymakers need to develop a greater understanding of how different constructions of masculinity interact with violent extremism.

Overall, the session emphasized the complexity of tackling violent extremism and demonstrated that the causal chain of radicalization is often unclear. Discussants stressed the need to move away from approaches that focus exclusively on profiling individuals and communities that support violent extremism towards those that address the relationships between structural drivers, individual incentives and enabling factors. For example, the successful de-radicalization programmes are those that have been able to address participants' self-esteem, ideological and political tenets, individual and group identities, experiences of exclusion, exposure to violence and personal relationships. Participants further noted that the desire to simplify violent extremism and, in some cases, exploit it has sometimes contributed to the misuse of labels (i.e. jihadist, Islamist, Nazi) in policy frameworks and legislation. While there is a need to establish common definitions of different types of extremist activities and actors, discussants highlighted several examples in which labels have been selectively applied, politicized or exploited to justify particular security responses. Discussants cautioned that labels often reinforce negative stereotypes, further marginalize vulnerable populations and inhibit interveners' response capacity.¹

¹ A more detailed review of the content of this session can be found in Holmes, M., 'Preventing violent extremism through peacebuilding: current perspectives from the field', *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2017), pp. 85–89 (DOI: 10.1080/15423166.2017.1336111).



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