



# Youth and Countering Violent Extremism in Africa

**Synthesis Brief, 2022**

## INTRODUCTION

The rise in terrorism and Violent Extremism (VE) in Africa has created severe security threats resulting in death, destruction and instability in the countries and regions where Violent Extremist Groups (VEGs) operate. In consequence, finding durable solutions to these issues have become prioritised national and regional security concerns. Meanwhile, Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) in Africa has largely remained elusive, judging by, for example, the large swathe of territories these groups control. One key reason for these failures is the lack of proper understanding of the phenomena.

### A. SUMMARY

Radicalisation among the youth has been increasing in Africa, leading to 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 hardly feature the youth at the centre of such policies. At best, they are 'consulted' from the margins and rarely given the space and role commensurate with their demographic significance. Indeed, some have argued that youth policies in Africa are more often political gimmickry than real policies; according to one report, 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 that national level policies geared at P/CVE need to place emphasis on strengthening youth feelings of inclusion. As key stakeholders, young women also need to be involved and included at all levels in shaping policy to address VE. It is suggested that African countries would probably be more successful at P/CVE if they were to recognise the demographic preponderance of their youth as well as their ability to find innovative and creative solutions to complex human and social problems.

This synthesis brief highlights and shares new findings from the pan-African research on "Understanding and Addressing Youth Experiences with Violence, Exclusion and Injustice in Africa," commissioned by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), as well as solutions and recommendations emerging from the broader literature and ongoing debates. This could help design more appropriate policies to prevent and counter youth engagement in VE.

### B. THE PROBLEM

Radicalisation and VE have been on the rise with an intensification of youth indoctrination to join VEGs. Women's involvement in VEGs seems to have expanded in recent years, making them integral to many aspects of the VEGs' 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, has remained a theatre for the 'war on terror'; the 'youth bulge', in addition to various micro- and macro-level factors, such as socioeconomic challenges and marginalisation, has contributed to an increase in

youths' vulnerability to extremist groups. Young people have often been used in political activities funded by 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 VE are not new to Africa but have evolved over the last two decades in more significant ways. Yet, the world has learned very little in terms of building a strong and resilient community to resist youth engagement in VE 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 lack of proper grasp of the underlying factors that drive and sustain youth involvement in terrorism and VE contributes to poorly designed policy interventions which are often based on flawed assumptions rather than scientific research findings. Studies found that various policies/practices concerning P/CVE interventions from the perspective of youth inclusivity do not entirely include youth. Many youths are not aware of such policies, but also initiatives that concern them do not materialise due to poor planning of those programmes. Policies typically fall short of enabling a wide range of stakeholders to better address African youth engagement with violence in general and situations of VE in particular. 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. Following from the above, and in its bid to bring fresh insights to strengthen P/CVE in Africa, one of the focus areas of this IDRC-funded study was to understand the lived experiences of youth with VE and draw on their knowledge, interest and participation to make P/CVE interventions more achievable.

## C. RESEARCH FOCUS

Launched in 2017, IDRC's pan-African initiative on *Understanding and Addressing Youth Experiences with Violence, Exclusion and Injustice in Africa* 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 P/CVE. The research reports [see list in the annex at the end of this brief] include:

**1. Kenya-Uganda (OSSREA):** In the report by OSSREA titled "*Youth Inclusive Mechanisms for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in the IGAD Region: Case Study of Kenya and Uganda*", the overall research question was "to what extent were mechanisms for P/CVE in the IGAD region youth inclusive?" The study identified which attempts have worked, which have not and why, in P/CVE in the IGAD region, focusing specifically on Kenya and Uganda, and in the process offering the most comprehensive (and scathing) reviews of current P/CVE policies.

**2. Tunisia (MEF):** The research by the Maghreb Economic Forum (MEF) on '*Tackling Youth Radicalisation Through Inclusion in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia*' argues for 'inclusion' as a core strategy in deradicalisation programmes in post-revolutionary Tunisia. This is against the background of the fact that 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. This is foregrounded (like the IGAD study) by a critique of existing P/CVE policies in Tunisia, in particular with respect to reintegration of returned 'foreign fighters', making a case for a policy shift from legal restrictions and coercion to 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-State actors (civil society and community organisations in particular) if it is to be successful. This vision of **inclusion** and **community approach** as transversal issues is highlighted (to various degrees) in all the studies.

The Tunisian study 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.

**3. Tanzania and Kenya:** And indeed unlike the 'hard security' approach adopted by States—which both the MEF and OSSREA studies conclude is largely failing—another study by the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), *“Negotiating The Space of Youth Amid Growing Insecurities: Lessons from Tanzania and Kenya”* offers examples of actual cases where informal youth groups and associations played a positive role in reintegration and inclusion of returned fighters, in contexts where State policies and initiatives had failed, aggravating rather than solving conflict.

**4. Mali and Niger:** The research by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), *‘Responding to Young Women’s Engagement in Violent Extremist Groups in Mali and Niger’*, conducted in the Mopti and Ségou regions of Mali and the Diffa region of Niger, focuses on promoting a better understanding of the factors influencing engagement and resilience of young women to VEGs in the two regions. It examines the choices women make in using or supporting violence to advance a cause or set of interests in two Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) countries (Mali and Niger). Its findings are corroborated by the larger study on IGAD (Uganda and Kenya) by OSSREA, which also investigates the interaction between gender and VE; both studies argue that women are not just 'victims' but also perpetrators with active roles in terrorist organisations. Women may willingly join and play a range of roles in these groups, from providing supplies and/or intelligence to actual combat. From Mali to Somalia, women's support, both passive and active, has contributed to the operational effectiveness and staying power of VEGs.

Additional inputs into this synthesis brief include a webinar report on *“Youth and Violent Extremism: Bringing New Voices to the Debate”*, mounted by the ASSN (African Security Sector Network) and IDRC, and extracts from the disparate literature and broader debate on terrorism and VE in the Horn.

## D. 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 VE, or when they are

included in policy responses, they are often perceived merely as victims. Women's roles tend to be poorly understood, in large part because their views are rarely aired. Ensuring that women are listened to and participate in CVE initiatives, particularly through community level associations—in sum, mainstreaming gender in P/CVE programming at the societal level—is thus essential. Peacebuilders should strive to integrate gender-sensitive (or 'gender transformative') perspectives into all facets of their CVE work as well as their programme design and implementation. As strategic resources to VEGs, women need to be part of Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration (DDR) and similar programmes reinforcing their resilience factors at the local level. This will provide a safety net for radicalised and disengaged individuals, which will increase the chances of their return, deradicalisation, and reintegration.

### 2. Leverage non-State actors, self-help organisations and local resources

P/CVE interventions appear to be largely focused on the formal sector, and customary and non-State actors are not engaged fully, despite studies that show that these actors are often more trusted in African contexts. Further, the research suggests that interventions by non-State actors have more impact on youth and their communities than State-led interventions, even where the political will and commitment to P/CVE exist. Indeed, there is evidence on the ground that youth networks have helped to reduce the level of radicalisation and (as in the case of the *Boda Boda* (motorcycle taxi) associations in Mwanza, Tanzania, and Bongwe Youth Network in Kwale, Kenya, cited in the UDSM study) even played a positive role in the reintegration and inclusion of returned fighters.

Community engagement requires building trust between officials and community members to establish a relationship of collaboration. Often grassroots engagement is not so much about being represented, but rather about participation and channelling the different voices within society. Community dialogue, and platforms for inclusiveness within the society help reduce exclusion, in turn contributing to the success of P/CVE. Tunisia demonstrates that social acceptability (especially from their own local community), and investment in social cohesion, are important factors for youth shifting from being radicalised to disengaged.



### **3. Seek to understand violence as part of resilience**

Addressing root causes requires viewing youth engagement in violence as in itself a form of resilience. Despite the framing that violence is negative and should be prevented, young people engage in it by joining VEGs in order 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 real life challenges faced by youth.

### **4. Be wary of hard security approaches**

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

### **5. Move away from ad hoc budgetary arrangements**

Most P/CVE 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 OSSREA study advises 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.

### **6. Apply intersectionality**

Governments and the wider policy community need to stop imagining that youth (and women) are homogenous, and instead design programmes and interventions that reflect the real world heterogeneity of youth and are tailored to the specific range of experiences.

### **7. Coordinate and integrate**

State and non-State actors have been operating in silos. Indeed, the studies recommend an all-government and all-community approach to P/CVE that is context-specific, gender-sensitive, and multi-pronged. Hence, multi-layered engagements become critical.

### **8. Recognise the value of a holistic approach and multi-level engagement**

To build on the preceding point: the studies suggest 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 NGOs and other non-State actors, investing in social cohesion, and taking on board the need to nurture and empower the youth.

### **9. Rebalance global and local logics**

Global perspectives need to pointedly consider local realities. Nonetheless, framing issues as an outcome of local level choices, rather than viewing them as responses to grievances grounded in perceptions of injustice and inequity, diverts attention from questioning unequal global power relations, and deep-rooted inequalities.

### **10. Fix the communication gap**

Although global and regional P/CVE instruments are available, 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.

## **E. AREAS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION**

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

At its broadest level, the studies recommend deeply inclusive processes. But as the case studies of Kenya and Uganda show, our understanding of the extent to which policy initiatives and interventions do – or do not – address issues of youth marginalisation and exclusion (with particular focus on structural barriers), is at a nascent stage. Further, interventions by State and non-State actors to prevent or counter youth from VE have been understudied and inadequately documented, not least by social scientists.

Job and employment creation schemes have dominated policy and programmatic responses to youth and VE 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 actually

succeeded in P/CVE remains to be documented.

There is also a dearth of gender analysis, and the different roles women play in VE. There is a need to acknowledge this fact and seek to better understand women's role in VEGs and insurgency movements. Data on the intersections between broader aspects of migration and VE is also scarce, making it difficult to make necessary robust recommendations. We need to be attentive to the linkages between VE and criminality; the political economy of VEGs suggests strong ties with criminality (as in the Sahel). This needs further investigation by researchers. Conversely, our understanding of the extent to which structural violence of the State feeds in turn into youth engagement with violence remains inadequate.

While discussing 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 rebel Lord's Resistance Army/LRA in Uganda, or Eritrea with rebel groups in the Horn of Africa, including Islamist insurgencies in Somalia); Al-Qaida's recruitment among Kenyan Muslims, and Boko Haram in northern Nigeria, and of course VEGs and their global financial and support networks. This will strengthen the case for academics and researchers to rethink (if they have not

already begun to do so) their approach to research on youth and VEGs (and indeed there is currently little academic research on VE from research institutes and think-tanks). This calls for more CVE research, better dissemination of what findings do exist, as well as sharing of best practices, research methodologies, and lessons learned.

## The IDRC Research Projects

- Institute for Security Studies (ISS), Responding to Young Women's Engagement in Violent Extremist Groups in Mali and Niger IDRC Project # 108 477-001.
- Maghreb Economic Forum (MEF), Tackling Youth Radicalisation Through Inclusion in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia, IDRC Project #108479.
- Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA), Youth-inclusive Mechanisms in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in the IGAD Region, IDRC Project #108483.
- University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), Youth Engagement in Addressing Violent Extremism Through Community Early Warning Systems in Kenya and Tanzania IDRC Project #108482.

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Author: Medhane Tadesse

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Design: Philip Emase

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The African Security Sector Network (ASSN), No. 27 Kofi Annan Avenue, North Legon, Accra, Ghana  
Email: [info@africansecuritynetwork.org](mailto:info@africansecuritynetwork.org), Web: [www.africansecuritynetwork.org](http://www.africansecuritynetwork.org)

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