



The Southern Voices Network for Peace(SVNP)

is posing significant threats and displacing communities through violence and terror. This new strategy

robots and drones to monitor patients and supply drugs during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to avoid physical contacts as a way of preventing the spread of the pandemic. Similarly, the same technology can also be used to fight or facilitate violent extremism.

Methodology

To meet the multifaceted research objective of PCVE in Eastern Africa, two stages of research activity were deployed, where primary data was obtained from a high-level stakeholder dialogue and secondary data was obtained through desk study. A participatory session dubbed “High-Level Policy Dialogue”⁹ on preventing and countering violent extremism captured the gist of PCVE in Eastern Africa. This session enabled selected high-level policymakers on the subject from different countries in Eastern Africa to discuss policy implications and a way forward for PCVE. Other stakeholders drawn from civil society and NGOs, universities and research institutes, and the media participated in the dialogue.

Key Findings and Discussions

Causes of V.E.E.

It is evident that most recruitment into violent extremism happens along borderlines, especially due to marginalization.¹⁰ It is also true that while most recruits had low levels of education, recruitment had taken place even in universities, targeting the highly educated as well. In many cases, people joined violent extremist groups due to financial constraints and joblessness. Some recruits think that joining al-Shabaab is just like joining any other military force, such as the police. However, some have also been forcibly recruited by extremists.

The other driving factor is weak democratic institutions, especially where people do not have confidence in their governments. Technology and globalization have also increased access to information where globalized ideas are generated to discredit some religions or ideologies. Recruitment is highly localized but influenced by globalized ideas. For instance, Al-Shabaab terrorists claimed that COVID-19 was only affecting infidels and therefore was a punishment from Allah. However, when COVID-19 reached their doorstep, they changed the narrative and said they would provide healthcare to people since governments had neglected them.

Another key issue is gender dynamics. The majority of African countries are patriarchal and fragile, thus facilitating violent extremism in the region, occasioned by a huge gap in gender equity.¹¹ The role of women in radicalization should not be taken lightly, as women are powerful and influential agents of change.

Hotspots of V.E.E.

There should be caution when using the term “hotspot.” Within Kenya, recruitment is not only concentrated

mold, rationalize, and normalize behavior that is radical and extreme. It is now beyond doubt that social media is actively used to radicalize and recruit young people (including women) into extremism¹² and terrorism. Therefore, it has become critical to examine ways in which social media can be used for preventing and countering violent extremism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, where virtual communication and online engagements are surging.

Implications for Capacity Issues, Knowledge, and Skills, East Africa

1. **Capacity Issues:** Lack of capacity, knowledge, and skills within institutions fighting radicalization fuels violent extremism. For example, the police do not know how to identify violent extremists; much of the training provided to police is focused on maintaining law and order, not countering violent extremism.
2. **Lack of Effective Policies and Implementation:** Lack of clear country mechanisms in dealing with violent extremism has fueled violent extremism in Africa. There is a need to provide adequate resources to relevant organizations and institutions to conduct research and advocacy in PCVE. The outcomes will be the formulation of evidence-informed policies and programs for PCVE.

Suggestions for Policy and Research, Knowledge, and Skills, East Africa

1. **Role of Youth:** There should be a regional framework for prioritizing youth projects as a way of engaging and empowering youth, thus making them less likely to fall prey to violent extremist recruiters.
2. **Role of Research and Policy:** There does not appear to be enough existing data on violent extremism for policymakers to adequately make decisions. There is, therefore, a serious need for scholars and research centers, such as the African Technology Policy Studies Network and the Center for Media, Democracy, Peace and Security at Rongo University, to be supported with funds to conduct research to generate enough data and evidence to inform policy and decision-making in preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) in the region and Africa as a whole.

Policy Options and Recommendations

1. Strong Regional Collaboration

There are many frameworks that would permit deeper collaboration on counterterrorism initiatives across the spheres of defense, security, and leadership bodies, as well as the legal framework of the East African Community (EAC), which, under its Chapter 23, Article 6, allows for the formulation of counterterrorism entities. This calls for cooperation agreements in the region with a permanent office for countering violent extremism and enforcement of the law. Collaboration within the region is critical in order to effectively combat violent extremism.

2. Investments in Research, Training, and Advocacy

Resources are required to support scholars to conduct applied research in the area of violent extremism, data on which is either scarce or non-existent in the COVID-19 period. Robust training is needed to enhance the capacity of those institutions involved in fighting violent extremism as well as those working in collaboration with youth and marginalized groups (potential targets for recruitment).

3. Information Sharing

Media, information sharing, and literacy training activities such as the Social Media Literacy Programs¹³ conducted by educational institutions in partnership with tech companies and civil society actors are crucial for vulnerable youth and repentant al-Shabaab militants. Overall, timely information sharing with all stakeholders is critical for PCVE.

4. Psychosocial Support for Victims, Vulnerable Groups, and Repentant Militants

The first line of psychosocial support for victims of violent extremism should be focused on rebuilding their lives. For example, credit facilities can be made available to youth and marginalized communities so that they can open up businesses and secure incomes. In the long run, this helps them to reintegrate back into their communities. Also, efforts should be made to help repentant militants reintegrate back into their families and society. This accords them the requisite support system and prevents them from backsliding. Finally, vulnerable groups could be supported by encouraging them to form associations

