SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND IN KENYA

Search for Common Ground (Search) recognizes the complexity of the security challenges facing Kenya’s coastal region, particularly violent extremism (VE), which in recent years, has proliferated at an alarming rate. While a variety of local, national, and international actors have invested resources in addressing the problem, there is a critical need to develop more holistic, inclusive, community-rooted solutions to effectively and sustainably address VE. In this context, Search and three local civil society partners, the Kenya Muslim Youth Alliance (KMYA), the Kiunga Youth Bunge Initiative (KYBI), and Muslims for Human Rights (MUHURI), are leading initiatives to build increased trust and collaboration between key community stakeholders, including civil society organizations (CSOs), local security forces, community leaders, and government officials, in order to transform violent extremism in coastal Kenya.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Violent extremism is a growing global concern with particular relevance to Kenya and its regional neighbors. Increased pressure and attention from the international community has led to an increase in military responses to violent extremism in Kenya and between civil society organizations operating within the same space. A significant gap in Kenya’s current National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism is that despite the intention to “shrink the pool of individuals whom terrorist groups can radicalize and recruit,” the concerns of those who are at risk or resorting to VE have not been fully understood.

To inform these efforts, Search, with funding from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), conducted extensive research1 to understand push and pull factors2 of violent extremism in Kenya and Tanzania’s coastal regions. This research has particularly deepened our understanding of influencers3, networks4 and communication channels5 for at-risk individuals, as well as provided a critical understanding of how stakeholders, community members, and peer networks play as inhibitors or catalysts in violent extremism. Additionally, this research highlights the significant relationship between local communities and security agencies, and to what extent increased cooperation can prevent violent extremism in the future.

Kenya’s current National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) states that the end goal is to “rally all sectors of Kenyan social, religious, and economic life to emphatically and continuously reject violent extremist ideologies and aims in order to shrink the pool of individuals whom terrorist groups can radicalise and recruit.” The intention of this policy brief is to share best practices and lessons learned from both Search’s recent research

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2 Poverty, lack of education, unemployment, police harassment, corruption, and drug trafficking
3 Defined as those who at-risk individuals turned to for advice (friends, peers, and family)
4 Spaces that at-risk individuals go to discuss problems and seek advice (digital, consumer, and personal)
5 Ways that at-risk individuals get access to and share information (online, media, and face-to-face)
coupled with our ongoing project activities conducted around VE in the region with stakeholders at the local, county, and national level, with the hope of expanding those results nationwide. Therefore, this policy brief will:

A. Provide a summary of the research conducted with the at-risk population
B. Identify opportunities to prevent this threat of violent extremism
C. Offer recommendations for how to best prevent future violent extremism in Kenya

Through this policy brief, Search has developed the following recommendations:

1. Revise the methods through which at-risk individuals are reached by empowering trusted influencers with skills and tools in non-violent solutions in areas where at-risk individuals engage socially like homes and maskanis;
2. Increase the effectiveness and credibility of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) already operating in Kenya to strengthen their ability to engage key community stakeholders to transform VE;
3. Improve the trust and engagement between security forces, county/national governments and the local population to reduce the drivers of VE and violence and construct a safer Kenya.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

An overwhelming amount of research shows that poverty and unemployment drive impassioned youth toward violent action, which makes money a powerful recruitment tool for extremists groups targeting these at-risk individuals. Our research shows that, at an even higher risk are those coming from a negative home life, such as those with single or missing parents, as well as those who are drug addicts. Additionally, civilians’ negative perception of security forces and the often adversarial relationships between civilians and security forces has a significant impact on violent extremism and creates more VE than it eliminates. Based on our research and programming, we have been able to identify several opportunities for the prevention of violent extremism. The research we have conducted found that the most effective way to improving how we deal with violent extremism is to address the root cause of this issue and understand why people turn to violence as a solution to their problems. We found that most individuals who resort to violent action do so because they feel it is their only remaining viable option. If given an ulterior method to addressing their grievances, it is our understanding that Kenya would see a reduction in violent extremist actions.

Despite growing global interest in countering violent extremism, evidence from our research and programming in Coastal Kenya, has identified opportunities to grow the preventive approach, rather than the reactive approach, as the best way to address the causes of conflict. Preventing violent extremism (PVE) focuses on the root causes of conflict, not just the symptoms, in order to achieve sustainable results. In addition to addressing core causes of violence, PVE must be impartial and inclusive. Paramount to the success of PVE is promoting dialogue over violent action. Choosing a soft power approach, such as community-led or collaborative re-
sponses, over military action has proven to be a superior method of preventing violent extremism, as military action has often been known to recruit more extremists than it eliminates. Overall, increased communication and relationship building will allow for an environment through which violent extremism can diminish.

With an elevated understanding in VE, it becomes evident that this is not simply a security issue. Fixing this issue will require improvements on all aspects of governance on both the county and national level. Creating a peaceful environment and providing better alternatives to at-risk individuals will be fundamental in preventing violent extremism. Potential opportunities for the successful PVE include refining the capacity of civil society organizations (CSOs), improving communication with at-risk individuals, developing community-policing models, and increasing dialogue between stakeholders.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

To address these grievances before they reach the level of violent action, we propose the following recommendations:

1. **Revise methods through which At-Risk Individuals are reached**

   A core component of preventing violent extremism is properly addressing the concerns of the local populations. Our research tells us that those at-risk individuals, frustrated with unemployment or poverty, struggle to find a peaceful way of addressing their grievances. Instead, violence is used as a tool through which their concerns are heard. Our research identified the most common influencers as friends and family with over 58% of participants listing these two categories. The research also highlighted that homes and maskanis, as well as mosques, are places the influencers interact with at-risk individuals in an informal social setting. Empowering trusted influencers with the skills and tools they need to provide concrete solutions to help at-risk individuals in their surrounding feel that they have more options than turning to a violent extremist group, is a critical approach to prevent engagement in VE. Local CSOs might design peer-to-peer support programs, empowering people to help their friends and family with practical, non-violent solutions, rather than those that are violent or ineffective. Furthermore, VE programming should include referrals to drug counseling for at-risk individuals in order to mitigate this particular risk, given that drug dependency is a major push factor toward violent extremist groups. The informal social meeting grounds, homes, maskanis, and mosques, can be utilized as a safe space to create controlled discussions with individuals prepared to offer constructive solutions to grievances. Our research shows that more VE programming is needed to target negative home life and parenting, including mentorship programs. Therefore CSO programming should be deeper and focus sustained engagement around homes and places of worship. Additionally, efforts must be made to reach the marginalized groups and hidden networks that are most vulnerable to recruitment of violent extremist groups.

   According to our research, despite increasing global focus on the importance of social media and the internet in violent extremism (especially in recruitment), programming intended to reach at-risk communities in
Kenya should still consider traditional forms of media (Radio and TV), as well as face-to-face interaction, and not just focus on digital platforms. When designing media programming, CSOs should focus predominantly on traditional channels to reach at-risk groups, given that face-to-face communication is still the most commonly used method. In terms of reaching out to a wider audience, the research indicates that media programming platforms may be used to engage broader audiences to support community resilience to VE issues. Our past programs have seen success using mobile theatres to bring thought-provoking and inspiring narratives to marginalized communities.

Therefore, broader based programming seeking to target a wide audience should target both markets (consumer spaces) and social media (Facebook and WhatsApp) as these are the spaces frequented by the most at-risk individuals.

When communicating with members of the community, inspiring narratives can be a powerful tool when promoting peaceful conflict resolution. Communication programs should draw inspiration from stories of peaceful conflict resolution, which can serve as a pull factor encouraging others to engage in dialogue when dealing with their grievances. Through the use of media programming, these inspirational narratives can reach a wide audience, displaying the possibilities of success through alternatives to violence.

2. Increase the effectiveness and credibility of Civil Society Organizations already operating within Kenya

When surveyed in our research, at-risk individuals indicated that they were far more likely to turn to friends and family before turning to CSOs to address their grievances. Less than 2% of those interviewed listed civil society as an influencer. Therefore, CSOs must reflect on how they are perceived, and on the approach they use to reach at-risk individuals in order to boost their capacity and credibility within the communities they are seeking to serve.

To improve their effectiveness and credibility, we recommend that CSOs escalate the involvement of at-risk and vulnerable youth and women from communities as implementers of peace using proven strategies such as the common ground approach. Additionally our research and programming have shown that CSOs can play a pivotal role in facilitating socialization forums between State Security Agencies and their community, thus allowing for constructive communication between the local population and the security forces. It has been made clear to us that there are often a great number of CSOs operating within one community, which can lead to competition for resources and less efficient outcomes. To prevent this, we propose prompt integration and coordination of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community based organizations (CBOs), faith based organizations (FBOs), and CSOs to allow for more information sharing and coordination of strategies preventing VE. Moreover, these groups can work leverage and use existing community-led mechanisms as entry points when engaging with the community. It is imperative that these CSOs continue to adhere to the principle of “Do No Harm” when working with local communities and security forces, to avoid exacerbating the conflict and amplifying the grievances of the local population. Lastly, to realise institutional gains; constructive engagement by CSOs and other non state actors with National and County Government
agencies will begin to enable a healthy discourse that provides a favorable political, social, economic and technological environment that weaken the pull factors and erode the push factors toward VE.

3. **Improve the trust and engagement between security forces, county/national governments and the local population to reduce the drivers of VE and violence and construct a safer Kenya.**

The divide between security forces and the communities they protect is not limited to Kenya alone, but is a familiar complication to much of the continent of Africa. This is a thematic issue that is central to the larger problem of violent extremism. Our research found that security forces were often accused of human rights abuses, failure to settle critical land issues, and heavy handed responses to criminal action. This stigma of being an oppressive security force only furthers the divide between them and communities. The divide between population and security forces, while challenging, is not impossible to correct. **Collaboration between the community and the law enforcement agencies** can and should be promoted as a key strategy to prevent violent extremism. We strongly recommend that local police forces receive **training on the preservation of human rights and engaging with vulnerable communities** so that a shared trust can be developed with the local communities. With a healthier relationship between security forces and local communities, at-risk individuals will feel less oppressed and will hence have less incentive to turn to extremist groups and/or use violent action to solve their grievances.

However, the government response to violent extremism is not limited to the issue of improved security sector responses and relationships with communities. The government should look more broadly at their relationship with at-risk/vulnerable populations. Both county and national government should seek to engage all aspects of governance to create a collaborative environment by addressing the overarching push and pull factors. Stakeholders interviewed in our research listed poverty and unemployment as their top grievances. Although the government on the national and county levels have programs that address poverty and unemployment, we recommend that there be an effort to incorporate vulnerable and at-risk groups into these programs and responses. In particular, the national and county governments should work to **strengthen economic and social equality, equitable distribution of resources** and include both **at risk/vulnerable women and youth in their development priorities**. All aspects of governance can be directed toward addressing the grievances of the people, thus reducing the pull factors of violent extremist groups. By including vulnerable and at-risk groups into the solutions, there is a better opportunity to **improve communication and understanding** between the two groups and to reduce the broader drivers of VE. Both security forces and county/national governments have an obligation to engage with at-risk communities to create a better understanding between them and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace in Kenya.

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