



RECONCILING COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF CONFLICT

WITH GOVERNMENT RESPONSES IN COASTAL KENYA

POLICY BRIEF

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INTRODUCTION

In response to an increase in violent extremism in Kenya, the Government of Kenya (GoK) has stepped up counter terrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts. These efforts have focused on militaristic and heavy-handed security approaches, which in some cases have been found to create more violent extremism rather than less.¹ The GoK developed a National Strategy on CVE in 2016 to address the need for a more robust and holistic response to violent extremism (VE). This strategy includes nine pillars dedicated to various aspects of both preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) and serves as a guide for all P/CVE work in the country.² Since then, action plans have been developed at the county level and civil society organizations (CSOs) and NGOs are encouraged to develop programming aligned with these pillars and strategies for a coordinated response to VE.

This policy brief is based on the findings of a conflict scan conducted by Search in four coastal counties - Lamu, Kilifi, Kwale, and Mombasa - in November of 2017.³ In comparison to VE drivers identified in a previous study (January 2017)⁴, this scan shows how previously identified VE drivers evolved, illuminates new conflict trends that have emerged, and evaluates the level of cooperation between various actors.⁵ For instance, the conflict scan suggests that politics and the 2017 elections have been increasing drivers to VE over the past year, as opposed to culture and religion, which was reported less frequently as a push/pull factor to VE. This conflict scan also paid special attention to the dynamics surrounding the 2017 presidential election and its potential impact on conflict trends. Key drivers to VE in coastal Kenya include: politics, the 2017 election, abuses of power, access to land, access to employment, and culture and religion. Two major dynamics affecting Coastal Kenya were also identified that are important for transforming VE and building trust between government and communities. This policy brief will present those dynamics and offer insights into opportunities for pursuing peace in the region.

1 Search for Common Ground (2017). Meet Me at the Maskani: Mapping of Influencers, Networks, and Communication Channels in Kenya and Tanzania, <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/SFCG-Meet-Me-at-the-Maskani-Final.pdf>

2 Government of Kenya (2016). National CVE Strategy.

3 Research and findings used in this brief come from a 2017 Conflict Scan conducted by Search for Common Ground and accessible on <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/KEN002-Conflict-Scan-Report-20180321.pdf>

4 Search for Common Ground (2017). Baseline Evaluation for Inuka Project, <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/SFCG-BASELINE-EVALUATION-REPORT-FOR-INUKA-PROJECT-Final.pdf>

5 The conflict scan consisted of 11 interviews with elected officials (at the county and national level) and security sector actors and 16 focus group discussions with youth, women, and community leaders.

CURRENT CONFLICT DYNAMICS AND TRENDS IN COASTAL KENYA

Driving Factors to Violent Extremism are Shifting Over Time

Within communities, at-risk individuals⁶ are pushed towards VE through feelings of marginalization due to exclusionary politics, lack of employment opportunities, and perceived religious profiling by the government and security sector. Additionally, many individuals seek economic incentives and the opportunity to be included in a meaningful cause, both of which are offered by violent extremist groups. These push and pull factors were identified alongside harsh security tactics against those perceived to be a part of VE groups, unemployment, and poverty by Search's research. To address these grievances, individuals look to friends and family for advice, however, Search's previous research found that family and friends were not able to provide solutions and options.⁷ Without nonviolent alternatives to address their grievances, at-risk individuals resort to violence. The conflict scan confirmed through interviews and discussions, that the drivers mentioned above persist and the most significant current driving factors to VE revolve around: politics, the 2017 elections, abuse of power, access to land, access to employment, and culture and religion. According to the community, some drivers increased from the initial report including politics, the 2017 elections, and access to land, while culture and religion decreased since previous research.

The conflict scan also highlighted that the 2017 election increased tensions and exacerbated existing county-specific conflicts, shifting the importance of certain drivers. In Lamu, conflict resolution mechanisms addressing farmer-herder conflicts went on hiatus during the elections⁸, causing tensions to rise and conflicts to break out. Likewise, security forces in Kilifi left land unprotected to monitor the elections resulting in increased land disputes between landowners and squatters who moved onto the unprotected land. In addition, elections in Kenya are often accompanied by political violence and divisive political messaging which manipulates pre-existing divisions for political purposes. This political violence increases existing tensions between communities and the security sector due to perceived corrupt practices leading to land displacement, forced disappearances, and direct violence at the hands of state security forces.

Government and Community Perceptions of Violent Extremism Drivers Differ

Many conflict drivers were perceived differently among government and security actors than the communities. For instance, access to land increased as a driver in all communities except Lamu. However, the government and security forces continually cited religion and culture across communities as the main driving force to VE. Meanwhile, community respondents overwhelmingly cited land issues, employment, and abuses of power as the most salient drivers of VE. This disconnect in perceptions lowers community trust in govern-

⁶ 'At-risk communities/individuals' are used here to refer to those who are susceptible to radicalization, this is used interchangeably with 'vulnerable communities/individuals'.

⁷ Search for Common Ground (2017). Meet me at the Maskani

⁸ Security forces attention and resources were more focused on election monitoring than local responsibilities like overseeing conflict resolution mechanisms and protecting land boundaries resulting in insecurity and increased tensions around land issues.

ment programs and can increase narratives of marginalization and oppression providing an opening for VE recruiters. For instance, access to employment is an important conflict driver felt most strongly by youth, yet it is ignored by most government entities. Thus, by offering economic incentives, recruiters provide a financial opportunity not met by government responses. In fact, the National CVE strategy does not include a pillar on employment, which could be a dangerous oversight. NGO and CSO programming, aligned with the government's nine pillars, would also reflect this gap in programming and leave an important community grievance unaddressed.

Exacerbating the disconnect between government and community perceptions, the importance of certain VE drivers within each community differs. For instance, although culture and religion occurred less frequently as a driver of conflict overall, it played a particularly important role in Lamu where farmer/herder conflicts have taken on religious divisions. Therefore it is important that programming both addresses community perceptions and is context-specific within each community.

Within these communities, many respondents held the view that VE actors are fighting for sincerely held beliefs (whether good or bad), are disciplined, and are fighting for people's rights and against oppression. This sympathy for VE actors is in stark relief to the distrust of security forces who are viewed as overly violent and abusing human rights. This distinction shows the communities' lack of trust in the government and security forces to protect the rights and interests of coastal communities. This distrust undermines potential peacebuilding and conflict resolution activities making them ineffective. For instance, traditional platforms like Barazas and Nyumba Kumis⁹, which are utilized by security actors, are often not trusted. Continual failures to protect the confidentiality of the identities of community members who provide information on VE has reduced their ability to create a collaborative and inclusive forum for community members. Now, many communities are hesitant to use these forums and see them as a one-way communication mechanism from the security sector to the community or as an intelligence gathering opportunity for security actors. Political violence and negative political messaging cause many communities to approach elections and government initiatives with caution and suspicion. The increased tensions from the 2017 elections and the divisive political messages increase the appeal of VE narratives that capitalize on feelings of marginalization and oppression. However, government programs that address VE could be an avenue where communities could begin to engage with political institutions and initiatives positively.

⁹ Further explanation of the new Nyumba Kumi government initiative and the traditional Barazas can be found in the November 2017 conflict scan.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEACE

Despite tensions between government/security forces and communities, and flawed local conflict resolution mechanisms, there are opportunities for a strengthened response to VE that prioritizes the importance of local contexts and needs while integrating into the larger National CVE Strategy. Communities have recommended the concept of collective (or shared) responsibility¹⁰ to address VE. They've also recognized the need for CSOs and NGOs to continue their work since it is an important way to bridge the gap between communities and government and has been shown to positively change conflict dynamics.

1) Ensure community voices and needs form the basis of VE programming through context-specific responses.

Assuring that programming responds to local context and needs helps to build trust and ownership among target communities. Current perceptions of conflict drivers among government and security actors are at odds with what is experienced and perceived within the community. This disconnect provides an opportunity for VE narratives surrounding marginalization and oppression to draw more recruits. To respond to differences among the counties, programming should be flexible so that it can respond and adapt to the specific complexities and priorities within each community. Programming should also be informed by local level conflict analysis within communities.

2) All VE strategy and interventions should be based on local community engagement and conflict analysis.

Communities vulnerable to radicalization should be meaningfully engaged in discussions of strategy and programming to address VE. The consultation and implementation of VE strategies should be accompanied by communications rollout strategies which engage at-risk communities about the scope and activities of the interventions. For instance, county action plans on VE should encourage the involvement of vulnerable populations so that community priorities are addressed and integrated into the implementation plans. To demonstrate the desire for continued community engagement and understanding, these action plans should be simplified and translated allowing communities to understand the terms and activities better and providing the opportunity for them to actively support the implementation.

3) Community ownership of efforts addressing VE should be encouraged by funding and supporting locally based initiatives and existing cultural events.

The GoK and international donors should empower and fund citizen-centric and community-led initiatives to prevent VE. Especially since current government supported conflict resolution mecha-

10 Promoted by various stakeholder, collective responsibility refers to the role that communities, community leaders, and the security sector have to work together to transform VE.

nisms (like the Nyumba Kumis and Barazas) are not trusted or used by communities. The GoK and international donors should seek to engage all stakeholders and, where appropriate, look to incorporate interventions into pre-existing networks and events. For instance, existing local cultural events that already gather communities to create positive experiences can be capitalized on to encourage ground up responses led and owned by the communities where they are based.

4) Establish an inclusive and safe environment through the protection of confidential information and data.

Providing confidentiality of collected information and data is imperative for all entities working in VE transformation. The GoK, security sector, and all CSOs engaged in VE programming should have training and procedures on conflict sensitivity and ethical data collection. In addition, they should strive to close the feedback loop to avoid confusion and manipulation of information. Promoting confidentiality and community protection will encourage communities to take part in future programming on VE and create a more inclusive environment. To encourage continued engagement with the security sector, new information provided by communities should be acted on quickly to highlight the benefits of working together.

5) Increase positive political messaging through promotion of collective responsibility and political engagement stories.

To discourage divisive political messaging and to build trust, reliable information on collective responsibility and community building should be shared and promoted with communities. Sharing examples of communities, community leaders, and security actors collectively addressing VE will show the positive outcomes of political engagement. Highlighting the positive side of political engagement can help to build a desire within vulnerable communities to work with the government and promotes the idea of a collective responsibility for VE transformation.