



GLOBAL EFFORTS IN INTEGRATING A YOUTH DIMENSION IN PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Outcome Report

Background

As most of the world's attention focuses on the international atrocities perpetuated by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)/Da'esh, continued global instability allows terrorist groups like Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab and others to aggravate and exacerbate conflict. As violent extremist groups predominantly recruit individuals between 15-30 years, it is crucial that efforts aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) engage this age group in developing and implementing solutions to the factors that make youth vulnerable to recruitment and radicalization to violent extremism and to highlight their contributions to international peace and security efforts. The need to involve youth in these efforts and engage them in building local resilience has been widely recognized by the international community and has been reflected in key policy documents like the European Council Conclusions on Counterterrorism (2015) and in UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250 (2015).

Indeed, recent P/CVE gatherings in Europe, the Middle East, and on the margins of the 2015 UN General Assembly, have produced frameworks and action plans created and led by youth networks¹ Additionally, Jordan organized an Open Debate on “Youth and Violent Extremism and Promoting Peace” during its presidency of the Security Council and hosted the Global Forum on “Youth, Peace and Security” in Amman in August 2015. Furthermore, as part of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) Horn of Africa Working Group, the co-chairs, the European Union (EU) and Turkey, organized an event focusing on Youth in the Horn of Africa held from 31 May - 1 June in Djibouti.

Building on these achievements and to reaffirm the important role youth can play in P/CVE efforts, on 22 September 2016 the governments of Belgium and Jordan and the EU co-hosted a high level event entitled “Global efforts in integrating a youth dimension in preventing and countering violent extremism” in New York. The event was held during the 71st United Nations General Assembly and back-to-back with the Seventh GCTF Ministerial Plenary meeting. It was part of a series of events on the topic held that day.

The event brought together over 120 participants from over 15 countries, including Jordan, Belgium, United Arab Emirates, Australia, Spain, Finland, Kazakhstan, Denmark, Turkey, and the Netherlands, as well as representatives from the United Nations, P/CVE practitioners, youth organizations and civil society actors focused on P/CVE-related policy

¹ European Conference: Youth Against Violent Extremism, <http://www.buildingbridgesforpeace.org/youth-against-violent-extremism-4-june-2015/>; Global Forum on Youth, Peace, and Security, <https://www.unteamworks.org/youth4peace/>; and Global Youth Summit Against Violent Extremism, *Youth Action Agenda To Prevent Violent Extremism and Promote Peace*, <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/FINAL-Youth-Action-Agenda-1.pdf>.



development, programing and implementation. The event provided a valuable platform to discuss practical ways of promoting youth participation and engagement in global, regional, national and subnational P/CVE initiatives.

High-Level Panel

Speakers in this panel, which included high-level officials from Belgium, Jordan, the European Commission (EC) and the United Nations, urged the international community to support youth-led and youth-focused P/CVE initiatives. In his opening remarks delivered via video message, the UN Secretary General Mr. **Ban Ki-moon** reiterated that his Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism “focuses heavily on fostering inclusive, political solutions to [...] escape the vicious cycle of protracted conflict, terrorism and violent extremism.” Underscoring that youth represent “promise and potential, not peril and problems”, the UN Deputy Secretary General Mr. **Jan Eliasson** called on governments to integrate youth in decision making at all levels and to leverage their unique skills, insights, and experiences in developing P/CVE policy and practice.

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Mr. **Nasser Judeh**, reiterated Jordan’s strong commitment to promoting the role of youth in P/CVE. He highlighted Jordan’s leadership in the Security Council in April 2015 which ultimately contributed to the adoption of UNSCR 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security in 2015. Noting that over 70% of Jordan’s population is below the age of 30 and the growing number of young refugees, he emphasized Jordan’s efforts to provide quality education and job opportunities to young people as a bulwark against Da’esh recruitment.

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Affairs of the Kingdom of Belgium, Mr. **Didier Reynders**, further highlighted the importance of resilience-building to prevent young people from joining violent extremist groups. He showcased the EC-sponsored “Bounce” project, which aims at empowering youth and their families to deal with radical influences by equipping them with early-prevention and awareness-raising tools.² He also stressed the need to counter extremist messages by discrediting the messengers and their narratives and noted Belgium’s efforts in contributing to counter-messaging initiatives and sharing experiences among EU Member States and beyond.

Reflecting on the EU efforts in the CT and P/CVE realm, Mr. **Neven Mimica**, the European Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development, pointed out that the EU has supported member states and partner countries in P/CVE efforts for over a decade and has recently significantly increased its support for these engagements outside the EU. In particular, he highlighted the EC support to the “Extremely Together” initiative of the Kofi Anna Foundation. The initiative gathers ten young leaders from diverse backgrounds who have sought to find positive responses to violent extremism to share ideas and experiences

² See for more information www.bounce-resilience-tools.eu.



and produce a toolkit to enable them and their peers to confront violent extremism.³ The EC is also establishing a network for local stakeholders to invite people from various backgrounds to visit schools, youth initiatives, sport clubs, and prisons to share their experiences.

Expert Panels: Youth Engagement and Strategic Communication

The high-level panel was followed by two expert panels, held under the Chatham House Rule, which delved deeper into practical ways of building societies more resilient to radicalization and recruitment to violent extremism through youth engagement and strategic communications efforts. Speakers included representatives from the United Nations and regional organizations, youth leaders and civil society actors from across the world.

Speakers highlighted a number of efforts, either directly or indirectly, related to P/CVE that are youth-led or focused on youth, including the provision of religious training, psychosocial support and educational services, or by building youth capacity to develop narratives against violent extremism as well as positive alternative narratives. Other efforts mentioned aim to offer youth alternatives to violence, such as positive paths of social and political action, heightening a sense of citizenship and community and providing interpersonal and vocational skills-building.

Underscoring that youth are not only recruits for or victims of violent extremism and terrorism, the speakers stressed that an increasing number of youth and youth organizations are actively engaged in peace and development efforts. However, it was pointed out that greater support could be given to amplify these efforts, as currently only a very small percentage of funding go towards these types of peacebuilding, resilience, and reconciliation activities, and even less is devoted to support youth-led or youth-focused organizations and initiatives.

In addition, the panelists asserted that deeper engagement and dialogue among and between youth, government, law enforcement and private sector are needed not only to provide an opportunity for young people to voice their concerns but to also put forth their proposals and existing tools to address the threat of violent extremism. It was pointed out that too often the youth feel as though they are being talked down to or told what to do instead of being considered as an autonomous stakeholder and an equal partner in the P/CVE process. Dialogue with youth could also help policymakers, practitioners and experts alike to better understand the local drivers that compel or motivate youths to join violent extremist groups.

However, speakers cautioned against instrumentalizing these efforts for security purposes and asserted that the ultimate goal should be to achieve peace and ensure prosperity

³ Kofi Annan Foundation, “Extremely Together: Young people coming together against violent extremism,” 13 April 2016, <http://www.kofiannanfoundation.org/promoting-youth-leadership/extremely-together-initiative-next-generation-counter-prevent-violent-extremism/>



for young people and their communities. One way to do so, they suggested, is by bridging the security-development divide and ensuring that P/CVE efforts complement each other whenever possible. Recognizing the importance of promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, and *vice versa*, the European Union, for example, draws on various geographic and thematic tools and frameworks, such as the European Development Fund (EDF), to help inform its P/CVE programs.⁴

Way Forward and Recommendations

Throughout the event, speakers and participants suggested a number of concrete recommendations for the donor community and implementing partners to consider when undertaking P/CVE initiatives, particularly as they relate to youth and youth organizations. Some of the key ideas are presented below:

1. *Develop and implement contextually-tailored and locally-owned P/CVE initiatives.* For instance, in communities where there are high unemployment rates and the offering of subsistence and significance is a primary entry point for radicalization or recruitment to violent extremism, programs focusing on job training and private sector partnerships may be more effective than strategic communication campaigns that focus on ideological issues. It was also suggested that perception studies could contribute to a more comprehensive local understanding of the problem and generate constructive, community-led and owned solutions.
2. *Support further research on youth radicalization and resilience.* These include a more nuanced understanding not only of the drivers of youth radicalizing or being recruited to violent extremism, but also of the factors that motivate youth to contribute to peace and development efforts. Additionally, studies should look closer at how youth utilize social media and other communication tools, how these platforms are used by violent extremist groups, and how they may be integrated into P/CVE efforts.
3. *Increase resources and funding to match political will and rhetoric.* Donors may consider supporting a variety of youth forums or networks that have an extensive reach and the credibility to work with youth in developing and implementing P/CVE-relevant youth-led initiatives. It is also important that the existing international and national frameworks on youth, peace and security are institutionalized and mainstreamed by integrating their core principles into relevant national strategies and by building the capacity of youth actors to engage in and undertake P/CVE programs.
4. *Ensure inclusive, two-way dialogue between and among youth, civil society and all sectors of government.* Governments could invite youth leaders and activists to speak

⁴ European Commission, “STRIVE for Development: Strengthening Resilience to Violence and Extremism,” <http://ct-morse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/STRIVE2016-EN-1.pdf>



at and participate in various events and meetings that seek to address the problem of violent extremism and terrorism. In addition, donors and multilateral organizations could facilitate platforms for interaction and networking among youth and practitioners from different cities, countries and regions to share programing ideas, lessons learned and experiences.

5. *Integrate youth perspective and promote youth participation in P/CVE strategic communication efforts.* Support could be given to peer-to-peer counter-narrative campaigns as youth are often seen as credible messengers in this regard. Support could also be in the form of media or capacity building training to develop youth organization's strategic communication skills or funding to develop their own messaging campaigns.
6. *Support youth civic engagement and foster youth leadership.* These efforts include supporting existing initiatives like youth camps, educational and cultural exchanges, and activities that promote a sense of belonging and national identity and focus on youth's potential role in P/CVE. Engaging with young parliamentarians could also help to raise awareness of youth issues and concerns.