

PURPOSE AND INTENDED USE:

This technical note (TN) aims to give guidance to Sida programme managers working on issues related to prevention of violent extremism (PVE). The TN includes information on how Sida interprets the concept of PVE and explains the difference and overlap between PVE and other types of peacebuilding support. The TN also clarifies Official development assistance (ODA) eligibility of PVE activities and examines common opportunities and risks associated with PVE. The paper focuses on the expressions of violent extremism in contexts where Sida is engaged.

INTRODUCTION

Violent extremism comes in different forms and different expressions depending on the context. As the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) puts it, violent extremism is “not confined to a specific region, nationality, ideology, or other belief system.”¹ There is no agreed definition of violent extremism, indicating that the concept is debated. Indeed, both the term “violent extremism” and the related but narrower term “terrorism” are vague and heavily politicised concepts that are sometimes exploited or misused.

According to the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), which is produced by the Institute for Economics and Peace, deaths from terrorism² was 6,701 in 2022.³ This figure has decreased by over a third since its peak in 2015.⁴ While the figures have decreased on a global level, in certain countries terrorism has increased, most notably in the Sahel region. Deaths in the Sahel region has increased from one percent of the global total in 2007 to 43 percent in 2022.⁵ Of particular concern are two countries: Burkina Faso and Mali. Violent conflict remains the primary driver of terrorism, with over 88 percent of attacks and 98 percent of terrorism deaths in 2022 taking place in conflict-affected countries. The three terrorist groups responsible for the most deaths in 2022 were the Islamic State (IS) and its affiliates,

Al-Shabaab, and Jamaat Nusrat Al-Islam wal Muslimen (JNIM).⁶ These groups are also engaged in armed conflicts with either government actors or other non-state armed groups, which means that the total number of casualties for which these groups are responsible is higher than just the deaths through terrorism.

IS and al-Qaeda are examples of what is sometimes referred to as transnational jihadism. While neither terrorism or violent extremism is new, it can be argued that the transnational nature of this dominant type of terrorism, not only in terms of goals but also organisational set-up, is a new phenomenon. More specifically, IS and al-Qaeda expands mainly through franchising, building on local societal cleavages and conflict fault-lines.⁷ Seen from the local perspective, local actors choose to reframe their conflict as a global campaign by using either the IS or the al-Qaeda brand.⁸ Recent research suggests that armed conflict with a transnational jihadist dimension are more difficult to bring to an end and more likely to recur, and that this is due to its *transnational* nature (on both the side of the non-state armed actor and on the side of the government) rather than religious claims of the armed group.⁹

The cost of conflict and armed violence, including violent extremism, reaches beyond the number of lost lives. The economic and social impact of violent extremism has long-lasting effects that are mostly felt in developing countries, for example related to health costs and decrease in tourism and trade. Heavy investments in militarised security responses also tend to divert funds away from development. The presence and operations of violent extremist groups affect livelihood possibilities and food security, especially in the most marginalised areas, where porous borders and the absence of central government facilitate the establishment, movement and cross-fertilisation of these groups, as well as the organised trade in weapons, drugs and other goods that sustain

1 OHCHR home page: ohchr.org/en/terrorism, accessed in October 2023.

2 The definition of terrorism used in GTI: “the systematic threat or use of violence, by non-state actors, whether for or in opposition to established authority, with the intention of communicating a political, religious or ideological message to a group larger than the victim group, by generating fear and so altering (or attempting to alter) the behaviour of the larger group.” GTI 2023, p 6. Please note that this definition makes terrorism something that states by definition cannot be engaged in. This is not a universally agreed definition, however.

3 Institute for Economics and Peace, GTI 2023, Ibid, p. 2

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid, p. 2

6 Ibid.

7 Nilsson, Desirée; Svensson, Isak: *Capitalizing on Cleavages: Transnational Jihadist Conflicts, Local Conflicts and Cumulative Extremism*, Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, April 18, 2022, p 1.

8 Ibid.

9 Nilsson, Desirée; Svensson, Isak: *The intractability of Islamist Insurgencies: Islamist Rebels and the Recurrence of Civil War*, published in *International Studies Quarterly*, vol 65, issue 3 (2021).

their existence. The consequences are disproportionately impacting education possibilities and job opportunities for children and youth, making young people at risk of becoming more marginalised from power and influence and thereby at risk for recruitment.

PREVENTING, COUNTERING OR COMBATTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND THE ROLE OF ODA

Both PVE and CVE (Countering Violent Extremism) are about countering terrorism through addressing radicalisation and violent extremism. PVE focuses on upstream preventative approaches that position themselves explicitly outside a security-driven framework, whereas CVE includes more coercive means. According to a literature review on the topic, PVE approaches “have largely emerged in response to the extensive criticism of approaches to CVE that extend the security-agenda into the realms of care, social work, and education.”¹⁰

The operations of extremist groups have so far mostly been followed by militarised counter-terrorism response. Such an approach may temporarily halt the most radical manifestations, but has proven incapable of addressing the complexities behind the drivers of extremism. The practice of labelling individuals, national and international criminal organisations and non-state armed actors as ‘terrorists’ has in effect criminalised negotiations with them. This has become a key challenge for dialogue and mediation efforts.¹¹ The connection between conflict, marginalisation and violent extremism therefore calls for development actors to define the linkage between peacebuilding, development and the prevention of violent extremism in the work towards achieving Agenda 2030. The UN New Agenda for Peace urges a prioritisation of comprehensive approaches over securitised responses in the following words: “Responses to violence, including addressing the threat posed by non-state armed groups such as terrorists and violent extremists, cannot be effective if not part of a comprehensive approach with a political strategy at its core. Failure to tackle the root causes of violence can lead to over-securitised responses, including in counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations.”¹²

A DAC High Level Meeting Communiqué in 2016 revised the reporting directives for ODA-eligible activities to include development assistance for certain PVE activities, as long as their priority purpose is developmental, they are undertaken through non-coercive means and they are led by partner countries. Financing of counterterrorism activities is generally excluded from ODA.¹³

In conclusion, the role of ODA in relation to violent extremism is mostly the upstream preventative measures included in PVE. PVE is a broad concept that can be translated into programming options that address both grievances at the individual, community and state levels. The concept thus has clear linkages to, and sometimes, overlaps with stabilisation¹⁴ as well as broader peacebuilding initiatives.

CONFLICT ANALYSIS AND PVE

In 2022, the 15 countries most impacted by terrorism were all suffering from conflict.¹⁵ As a rule, it is important to analyse *the conflict*, rather than violent extremism in isolation from the conflict. There are exceptions to this rule, such as when there are terrorist attacks in otherwise peaceful countries. But in many countries where Sida works there is both conflict and violent extremism, and those two are interlinked. In the section above we have seen that PVE is closely related to and overlaps with peacebuilding and stabilisation. Sida’s work with PVE in conflict countries should therefore, just like our work on peacebuilding and stabilisation, build on a conflict analysis. Conflict analysis helps ensure that PVE efforts are well designed and strategic in terms of supporting peace. A conflict analysis is also needed as the basis for taking action to integrate conflict sensitivity in the design and implementation of the programme, as further explained below.

Some helpful tips for the conflict analysis:

- Tease out the links between armed conflict and violent extremism. Most peacebuilding focuses on drivers of conflict, whereas PVE focuses on drivers of violent extremism. These are not the same, but they are interlinked.
- Undertaking broad and holistic analysis of drivers of conflict as well as drivers of violent extremism and avoiding simplified assumptions pointing at certain ethnic groups, religions or ideologies. Also, bear in

¹⁰ William Stephens, Stijn Sieckelinck & Hans Boutellier (2021) Preventing Violent Extremism: A Review of the Literature, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 44:4, 346-361, s 1.

¹¹ Lundgren, Magnus; Svensson, Isak: The surprising decline of international mediation in armed conflicts, published in Research and Politics, (April – June 2020).

¹² A New Agenda for Peace (July 2023), p 13. The quote is not to be understood as ruling out multi-national Peacekeeping and Peace Enforcement efforts, that are covered in other parts of the report.

¹³ INCAF Facts and Figures series: ODA flows to support preventing violent extremism.

¹⁴ The 2022 EU Stabilisation concept defines stabilisation as a set of swift actions aimed at creating conditions supportive of a political process, helping locally legitimate actors to prevent or reduce violence amidst an active or recent conflict, and initiating efforts to address the drivers and the consequences of a crisis (WK 13776/22, dated 12 October 2022).

¹⁵ Institute for Economics and Peace, GTI 2023, p. 8.

mind that communities at risk of recruitment and radicalisation to violent extremism are usually not the same as communities that development donors and actors usually focus on. Poverty is not *per se* a risk factor for violent extremism.

- Taking into consideration the interconnections between local, national, regional and global dynamics, including political-economy dimensions and relation between war economies, organised crime, illicit financial flows and formal economies.
- Analysing gender norms, including glorification of violence, sexual violence and masculinity norms, and consider how to address them. Research from Uppsala University has looked at masculinity and honour ideology, i.e. that 'a real man' equals patriarchal values. The research found that men who endorse honour ideology and ideals of masculine toughness (i.e. that men must be fierce and willing to use violence to defend their status), show higher probability of using violence.¹⁶
- Analysing power dynamics and legitimate authority. UNDP has done research based on interviews with individuals who have been recruited by violent extremist groups on the African continent and gives insights into the drivers, incentives and tipping point for joining extremist groups.¹⁷ The study concludes that those who are most susceptible to recruitment demonstrate a significantly lower degree of confidence in the potential for democratic institutions to deliver positive change. Government action was often identified as the final trigger that motivated them to join the organisation (most commonly "killing or arresting of a family member or friend").¹⁸

Some helpful tips for PVE programming:

- Radicalisation as such does not necessarily cause terrorism. Focus should rather be on the violent expressions of radicalisation or extremism. An alternative direction for relevant programmes would be to invest less in changing people's ideologies and more in changing their lived reality.
- Ensuring that women and youth are involved in shaping the strategies, approaches and definitions that underpin PVE efforts, while recognising that women can also play an active role in conflict dynamics.

- Ensuring that objectives of interventions are framed within a development approach and serve to contribute to development objectives, including inclusive peacebuilding, social cohesion and improved human security for communities most affected by violence or at risk from violence.

CONFLICT SENSITIVITY AND PVE

Based on the conflict analysis, the next step is to make sure that the PVE engagements are designed, planned and implemented in a way that minimises the risk of fuelling tension and conflict and maximises opportunities to support peace. With regards to PVE, the following conflict sensitivity concerns are often flagged:

- **Beneficiary selection:** Take care not to unintentionally stigmatise whole religious or ethnic groups. Focusing on risk groups may cause unintentional stigmatisation or exacerbated feelings of marginalisation. Targeting ex-recruits, for example, through reintegration programmes, can also imply the risk of creating tensions with those that are not benefitting, or signal that 'violence pays'. Interventions directed towards risk groups or ex-recruits should be implemented from a community-based approach to the highest extent possible. (Cf distribution effects, the Do No Harm framework for analysing the impact of aid programmes on conflict)¹⁹
- **Links with military/security agenda:** Interventions implemented in highly complex contexts by a donor government with geostrategic interests or that is involved in military/stabilisation operations are at risk of "securitisation" (real or perceived). In such contexts, development cooperation run the risk of being co-opted or assumed to serve national or international security concerns rather than local needs. On the other hand, cooperation with security agents, that are seen as legitimate, within the framework of sound security sector reform can increase security. (Cf legitimisation effects, the Do No Harm framework for analysing the impact of aid programmes on conflict)
- **Biased approach:** States often frame conflicts or opposition groups as violent extremists or terrorist to justify a reinforcement of state authority. This is sometimes combined with restrictions on civil society, where only those groups that buy in to the government's counter-terrorism agenda are tolerated. All too often such an attitude by the state is associated with human rights abuses. A development cooperation programme that sides

¹⁶ Bjarnegård, E., et al (2017): Honour and Political Violence: Micro-Level Findings from a Survey in Thailand, *Journal of Peace Research*, 2017, vol. 54(6) 748 – 761.

¹⁷ UNDP (2017): *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment*, UNDP Regional Bureau for Africa, United Nations Development Programme Regional Bureau for Africa.

¹⁸ *Journey to extremism in Africa: Pathways to recruitment and disengagement* | United Nations Development Programme (undp.org), 2023, p. 16

¹⁹ The Do No Harm framework for analysing the effects of aid on conflict was developed by [CDA Collaborative](#). The resource transfer effects that are referenced here are also explained in Sida's e-learning "Integrated conflict perspective in Anyland".

with the state in such a situation, or is perceived as siding with the state, may unintentionally legitimise shrinking civic space and even human rights abuses. If this is the case, reconsider the engagement or mitigate the effect by for example including a strong human rights component and political dialogue and communication strategy. [Cf legitimisation effects, the Do No Harm framework for analysing the impact of aid programmes on conflict]

- **Credible partners vs instrumentalisation of civil society:** The effectiveness of initiatives to prevent recruitment depends on the perceptions towards those who are delivering them. Local civil society groups, broader peacebuilding initiatives and women's and youth's rights activists are important actors for PVE, but also in their own right and thus should not be imposed a single agenda to receive funding. For example, rather than trying to co-opt women's and youth organisations to serve top-down, state-driven counter-terror strategies, it would be more valuable to support them to set their own agenda for its own sake and have a say in shaping wider stabilisation strategies and peace processes. Furthermore, implementing PVE initiatives might entail exposure to security risks. This needs to be considered in the selection of partners and the support provided. [Cf legitimisation effects, the Do No Harm framework for analysing the impact of aid programmes on conflict].
- **Funds diverted to extremist groups:** Risk mitigation measures may be needed to ensure that ODA funds do not end up financing violent extremism. This can be done through diligent anti-corruption measures, protection against theft and proper due diligence in procurement. In cases where there are EU or UN sanctions in place, agreement conditions apply.

[Cf theft & diversion effects, as well as market effects, the Do No Harm framework for analysing the impact of aid programmes on conflict].

- **Replacing vs supporting:** If international support to PVE means that certain groups that are viewed as risk groups for violent extremism are cared for only by internationals and not by their own government, there is a negative substitution effect. In such a case interaction by the Government with these groups decrease and the risk of entrenching stigmatisation increases. Rather, the international support should support positive engagement between the government and at-risk-groups and expect the Government to serve all its people without discrimination. [Cf substitution effects, the Do No Harm framework for analysing the impact of aid programmes on conflict].

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- Ris L. and Ernstorfer A. (2017); [Borrowing a Wheel: Applying Existing Design, Monitoring and Evaluation Strategies to Emerging Programming Approaches to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism](#), CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, March 2017.
- Institute for Economic and Peace, [Global Terrorism Index 2023](#).
- UNDP (2023): Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement, United Nations Development Programme Regional Bureau for Africa.
- Attree, Larry; Street, Jordan (2022): [No short-cuts to security: Learning from responses to armed conflicts involving proscribed groups](#), Saferworld, May 2022.