

YOUTH

AND THE FIELD OF

COUNTERING

VIOLENT

EXTREMISM

## Youth and the Field of Countering Violent Extremism

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### Suggested Citation:

Sommers, M. (2019). *Youth and the Field of Countering Violent Extremism*. Washington, DC: Promundo-US.

### Acknowledgments:

Many thanks to Gary Barker, Tim Shand, and Abby Fried of Promundo-US for their review and inputs into this paper. Thank you to Nina Ford of Promundo-US for coordinating this paper's production; to Jill Merriman for its editing; and to Daniel Feary for its graphic design and layout.

### Promundo-US:

Founded in Brazil in 1997, Promundo works to promote gender equality and create a world free from violence by engaging men and boys in partnership with women and girls. Promundo is a global consortium with members in the United States, Brazil, Portugal, and Democratic Republic of the Congo that collaborate to achieve this mission by conducting cutting-edge research that builds the knowledge base on masculinities and gender equality; developing, evaluating, and scaling up high-impact gender-transformative interventions and programs; and carrying out national and international campaigns and advocacy initiatives to prevent violence and promote gender justice.

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## ABSTRACT

Most youth are peaceful. Even if the field known as “countering violent extremism” (CVE) did not exist, most young people still would not join a violent extremist organization (VEO). At the same time, the overwhelming majority of people who become violent extremists are youth — most of whom are male. The challenge at the center of CVE is thus an unusual one: identifying the fraction of youth populations most likely to enter a VEO and thwarting that option.

This paper investigates that challenge, with analysis featuring interviews with 21 experts and over 400 publications on violent extremism, CVE, and youth. Two correlations inform this work: the direct relationship between nations with “youth bulge” populations and state repression, and the connection between state repression and increased violent extremism, with repressive states usually targeting male youth.

The analysis reveals that:

- a An understanding of what it is like to be a youth in areas vulnerable to VEO activity is largely missing.
- b Narrow, implicit understandings exist about “gender” (which many understand to mainly refer to women and girls) and “youth” (which many understand to primarily refer to male youth).
- c While VEOs regularly display gender expertise in their recruitment tactics, the gender literature on VEOs and CVE is surprisingly weak overall, particularly on critical issues such as emasculation, alienation, humiliation, the prospect of failed adulthood for female and male youth, and issues of masculinity more generally.
- d Counterproductive government behavior has been found to regularly sideline youth and unintentionally boost VEO efforts.
- e Some community leaders exhibit low tolerance for dissent and actively marginalize youth, who may respond by forming their own communities.

Effective CVE work is hard to do and even harder to prove. Compared to the development field, in which pressure to demonstrate success is often high, the CVE field appears more open to learning from well-intentioned missteps and offers continued encouragement of informed experimentation.

Recommendations based on the analysis include:

- 1 Make the CVE-youth connection emphatic. In its essence, CVE is a field of youth practice.
- 2 Explicitly link youth to gender issues. Gender needs to become fundamental to VEO research and CVE action. Masculinity must be highlighted, not overlooked.
- 3 Probe and account for class divisions. This should include reassessing community activities given the active ostracism of youth by some local elites.
- 4 Prioritize CVE programming that emerges from context-specific local needs.
- 5 Couple local programming efforts with sustained advocacy with governments. The advocacy should center on reforming policies and practices that repress and exclude young people, as well as partnering with youth vulnerable to VEO recruitment.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword	4
Executive Summary	5
Introduction: The Irony at the Center of Countering Violent Extremism	7
<b>PART ONE: YOUTH IN CONTEXT</b>	<b>9</b>
The Distorted Starting Point: Male Youth as Threats to Society	10
Youth, Violence, and the State: Two Important Correlations	12
Who Are “Youth”?	14
A Look Ahead: Six Youth Issues to Remember	16
<b>PART TWO: YOUTH IN COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM</b>	<b>19</b>
Definitions of Countering Violent Extremism: Implications for Youth	20
Elusive Youth: Searching for the Few Who Join	24
The Work of Countering Violent Extremism: Four Observations	30
Central Conclusions	35
Recommendations	37
References	42
About the Author	46

### List of Acronyms

CT	counterterrorism	VEO	violent extremist organization
CVE	countering violent extremism	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria	UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
NGO	nongovernmental organization	UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
PVE	preventing violent extremism	USAID	US Agency for International Development
VE	violent extremism		

# FOREWORD

Most of the world's violence — in public spaces, in private spaces, and in conflict or war — is carried out by men, often young men. Promundo's research and programmatic work have long sought to understand how gender norms and identities, and particularly masculinities, are part of reproducing violence — and, therefore, how gendered identities must be part of ending violence.

From our research and work in Rio de Janeiro's favelas to our work with ex-combatants and with women, men, and youth affected by conflict in various parts of the world, we have seen how preconceived notions about who youth are often push them toward violence. We have witnessed how local elites, policymakers, adults, and international agencies often look at youth either as helpless victims or as problems waiting to happen. In either of these simplistic representations, we strip young people of their humanity and complexity, and we then too often implement misguided policies and programs. Indeed, in our simplistic representations of youth, we sometimes inadvertently fan the flames of the very violence we hope to prevent.

Promundo is pleased to publish Marc Sommers's analysis of the gaps and directions in bringing a youth and gender lens to the field of countering violent extremism. Although we did not originally commission the report, we are pleased to offer it a space. We feel that *Youth and the Field of Countering Violent Extremism* represents a significant contribution to our understanding of youth and violent extremism. It also informs the work of policymakers and practitioners in the space known both as "countering violent extremism" (CVE) and "preventing

violent extremism" (PVE). Rather than simply accepting the status quo of how some young people turn to violent extremism, this report provides a deeper, insightful look, forcing us to understand how violence emerges in the clash of political and individual frustrations, and in the search for identity and opportunity.

Promundo considers this report's emphasis on youth and gender issues in the PVE and CVE space to be particularly significant because it shines a light on how emasculation, humiliation, exclusion, and alienation fuel violent extremism. It also calls our attention to the fact that even when all these factors are present, it is only a small number of young men (and some young women) who join extremist groups. The paper reminds us of a somewhat obvious but still overlooked fact: the majority of youth, even in deeply conflicted societies, do not join extremist groups. However, the majority of those who join extremist groups are youth, and generally male youth.

Extremist violence thrives in our ignorance about young peoples' lives and about their voices and aspirations, as well as in our lack of understanding about how rigid gendered norms shape their identities. The solutions to extremist violence, or youth violence of any kind, will only be found when we truly listen to youth; when we let youth drive the solutions; and when we simultaneously support young women and help young men find the empathy, connection, and peaceful identities they long for.

**Gary Barker**, President and CEO, Promundo-US



# EXECUTIVE

# SUMMARY

If the field known as “countering violent extremism” (CVE) did not exist, most young people still would not join a violent extremist organization (VEO). At the same time, although most youth are peaceful, the overwhelming majority of people who become violent extremists are youth — and most are male youth. The lack of clarity about the fraction of youth populations vulnerable to violent extremism makes the practice of countering or preventing entrance into a VEO an exceptionally challenging endeavor.

The purpose of this discussion paper is to investigate the youth challenge in the CVE field. It probes the role youth play in CVE and suggests recommendations for enhancing CVE’s effectiveness. The paper also examines youth with reference to violence, conflict, the state, and struggles to achieve adulthood. The analysis features interviews with 21 experts and a review of over 400 publications on violent extremism, CVE, and youth. The primary contexts considered are the Middle East and Africa, particularly what one expert called “the big four” violent extremist groups: ISIS and al-Qaeda (both of which are based mainly in the Middle East) and Boko Haram and al-Shabaab (which are located in sub-Saharan Africa).

The analysis reveals two correlations underpinning the context for youth and violent extremism. First, there is a direct relationship between nations with “youth bulge” populations and state repression. Second, state repression is linked to increases in violent extremism. In both cases, repressive states usually target male youth. In addition, there remains a tendency to treat youth as a problem to address instead of actors with whom to

engage. Governments, international institutions, and elite leaders routinely resist enacting the policy and practice reforms that today’s huge youth populations demand.

Threatened or failed adulthood (failed masculinity in particular) also emerges as an important cause of instability. Across much of Africa, the Middle East, and beyond, youth struggle and often fail to gain social recognition as adults. This can exacerbate humiliation, exclusion, and alienation for both female and male youth while laying the groundwork for pronounced tensions between older elites and struggling young people. VEOs exploit this fertile recruitment ground.

Four central conclusions emerge from the analysis for this discussion paper:

- 1 *Youth:* Although CVE is a form of inquiry and activity related to youth, a deep understanding of what it is like to be a female or male youth in areas vulnerable to VEO activity is largely missing.
- 2 *Gender:* While gender is a dynamic central force in youth’s lives and VEO recruitment strategies, gender issues often are not central to the CVE field nor to research on violent extremism. The increasing body of research on the essential roles that women and female youth play in VEOs is encouraging. However, the pronounced underemphasis of masculinity issues is disturbing, particularly given the centrality of emasculation, shame, humiliation, and related concerns for youth and VEO recruiters — and the fact that most VEO recruits are male youth. “Gender”

is also chiefly understood to refer to women while “youth” is mainly understood to refer to male youth — both distortions that underemphasize female and male youth’s struggles with adulthood, exclusion, disempowerment, and alienation.

- 3 *Governance:* Government behavior has been found to regularly sideline youthful populations and boost VEO efforts unintentionally. State repression is counterproductive in the extreme because it separates youth from governments and undercuts the viability of alternatives to joining a VEO.
- 4 *Community:* Even as communities play a central role in CVE practice, some local leaders exhibit a low tolerance for dissent and actively marginalize youth. Some youth may respond by forming their own communities.

The recommendations include the following:

- 1 *Make the CVE-youth connection emphatic.* Enhancing the focus on youth promises to expand the awareness and understanding of which youth enter VEOs — and of why most youth never do. The central aim should be to build and apply knowledge of what it is like to be a female or male youth in areas where violent extremists are active or that are vulnerable to violent extremist activity.
- 2 *Directly link and highlight “youth” and “gender” in research and action.* The “gender and CVE” field mixes significant advancement with perplexing oversight. Efforts to detail the vital roles of female youth and women for VEOs are crucial. However, the study of male youth is inadequate given that male youth dominate the ranks of VEOs and that exploiting masculine vulnerabilities is a VEO specialty. Emasculation, humiliation, exclusion, and alienation should be examined much more deeply. Currently, VEOs demonstrate gender expertise. In response, the underemphasis on issues of masculinity must be reversed while investigation of the essential functions of female youth and women for VEOs must expand.
- 3 *Highlight class divisions in policy and program work.* Two sets of class divisions should be investigated and used to inform policy and program work: those within youth populations and those driven by elite leaders who actively marginalize and repress certain kinds of youth — including youth vulnerable to entering a VEO.
- 4 *Ensure that CVE action emerges from what the local context requires.* Programs should be directly informed by focused research on youth-specific local dynamics. While reaching truly marginalized youth may be difficult for CVE practitioners, it appears to be a VEO specialty. Accordingly, CVE initiatives should be customized to address those youth identified by research as most vulnerable to VEO recruiters. Considering creative approaches to local programming guided by marginalized youth is recommended. Partnering with youth, recognizing the positive contributions of youth to CVE and peacebuilding, and promoting peaceful masculinities are all recommended. Never overlook the gender-specific concerns, priorities, and vulnerabilities of female and male youth.
- 5 *Remember that locally driven approaches to CVE challenges are necessary but not sufficient.* Positive engagement with youth is a potential “win-win” for governments. Repression is not. Determined and steadfast advocacy with governments should draw on expertise gained from CVE programming. It should center on the meaningful reform of policies and practices that repress and exclude youth. Partnerships that link government and elite leaders with youth may be nontraditional and, at first, uncomfortable, particularly for power brokers and security forces personnel. However, they also are crucial to future CVE and peacebuilding success.
- 6 *Maintain a learning environment in CVE work.* Effective CVE work is hard to do and even harder to prove. Compared to the development field, where pressure to demonstrate success often is high, the CVE field appears to be more open to learning from well-intentioned missteps. Continued encouragement of informed experimentation is urged.



# INTRODUCTION: THE IRONY AT THE CENTER OF COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The age of youth is upon us. A United Nations report stated that the global population of adolescents and young people has reached an all-time high (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2012, 3). “Our world is home to 1.8 billion young people between the ages of 10 and 24, and the youth population is growing fastest in the poorest nations,” a second United Nations publication maintained; nearly one in four people is a youth, and almost nine in 10 live in developing nations (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2014, 3, 5).

The presence of unprecedented populations of young people has impacted the world in a host of ways. In much of the world, older politicians govern vast expanses of exceptionally youthful citizens. More youth points to a need for more schools and jobs. The reach and influence of portable technology are growing fast, and its dynamic role in youth lives is on the increase.

Another example of youth in the thick of things concerns the still-emerging field of countering violent extremism (CVE), which arose in response to the ability of violent extremist groups to threaten, destabilize, and sometimes dominate parts of the world. Youth and CVE, it turns out, are related in two important ways. First, both concepts are broad and vague; it is not entirely clear what either term means. Youth can be an age range or a life phase between childhood and adulthood. The reported age of youth

who have entered violent extremist organizations (VEOs) is variable but reasonably consistent, with most appearing to be in their late teens or 20s.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the challenge of attaining adulthood remains for many youth: until they gain social recognition as men and women, they may be viewed as youth into their 30s and beyond. Similarly, there are debates over what constitutes a violent extremist group.

The second connection between youth and CVE is much more direct. The practice of CVE concerns keeping people from joining a non-state VEO. The overwhelming majority of those who become violent extremists are youth, most of who are male youth (Alan, Glazzard, Jespersen, Reddy-Tumu, & Winterbotham, 2015; Kimmel, 2018; Mwakimako, 2018). Whether highlighted or suggested indirectly, CVE focuses on young people deemed vulnerable to becoming violent extremists. As a CVE expert remarked in an interview for this study, “Youth is implicit in CVE work because they are the ones who are vulnerable to recruitment” by VEOs.

As this comment indicates, experts in and literature about CVE consistently make clear that most people who become violent extremists are youth. At the same time, the proportion of youth populations who end up in VEOs is small. It is here where youth and CVE are most closely intertwined. CVE’s quest to counteract the recruiting efforts of VEOs takes place primarily in

<sup>1</sup> Here are three examples of this trend: Over half of one research sample were aged 17 to 26 when they were recruited into VEOs (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2017, 26). Eighty-six percent of a research sample of former fighters in a dominant East African VEO (al-Shabaab) joined when they were aged 15 to 29 (Botha & Abdile, 2014, 2). A study analyzing data on “604 Western fighters from 26 Western countries” who had “left their home countries to fight with ISIS or other Sunni jihadist groups [all of which are VEOs] in Syria or Iraq” had similar findings: the average age of those in the sample was 25, and a fifth were teenagers. The average age of female recruits was 22 (Bergen, Sterman, Sims, & Ford, 2016, 2, 3, 7).

countries with colossal populations of young people. The drive to thwart violent extremists from attracting or coercing relative handfuls of young people has inspired one expert to compare CVE work to “searching for needles in a haystack.”<sup>2</sup> The work thus is neither easy nor straightforward, and it boils down to the following irony: *Although the overwhelming majority of recruits into VEOs are youth, tiny proportions of vast youth populations become recruits.* Even if CVE did not exist, most female and male youth would not become violent extremists. At the same time, the tiny proportions of youth who enter VEOs are having a disproportionate effect. Accordingly, as youth encircle the field of CVE and are its central focus, understanding what it is like to be a youth and engaging effectively with those vulnerable to recruitment arguably constitute CVE’s two greatest concerns.

The purpose of this discussion paper is to investigate the role and significance of youth in the CVE field. Part One focuses on lessons drawn from research in development and conflict contexts. Part Two explores definitions, research, and action that directly relate to the CVE field. The paper concludes with suggestions for enhancing the approach and effectiveness of CVE-related inquiry and practice.

This paper draws on two sources of information for its findings and analysis. The first is interviews about CVE and youth with 21 experts working for the US government, a multilateral organization, the United Nations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and academic institutions. The second is an examination of a broad array of over 400 publications on violent extremism, CVE, preventing violent extremism (PVE), and youth. The primary contexts considered are the Middle East and Africa, particularly what one expert called “the big four” violent extremist groups: ISIS<sup>3</sup> and al-Qaeda<sup>4</sup> (both of which are based mainly in the Middle East) and Boko Haram<sup>5</sup> and al-Shabaab<sup>6</sup> (which are located in sub-Saharan Africa).

CVE is a relatively new and important field of inquiry and action. The challenge is exceptionally difficult: identifying the relatively few female and male youth who may enter a VEO and turning them toward a more peaceful and productive life instead. With an eye toward aiding those dedicated to the work of CVE, the following findings, analysis, central conclusions, and recommendations are provided.

- 2 The authors of a CVE study discussed later in this paper employ the same metaphor to diagnose “a ‘needle in a haystack’ problem” (Khalil & Zeuthen, 2016, 21).
- 3 ISIS refers to the “Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (or Islamic State in Iraq and Syria): a radical Sunni Muslim organization whose aim is to restore an Islamic state, or caliphate, in the region encompassing Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, the Palestinian territories, and southeastern Turkey” (Dictionary.com, n.d., *ISIS*). It is also known as Daesh (sometimes spelled Da’esh), which “is essentially an Arabic acronym formed from the initial letters of the group’s previous name in Arabic — ‘al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa al-Sham’... In the Arabic-speaking world, where the use of acronyms is otherwise uncommon, Daesh is used widely but with pejorative overtones” (Irrshaid, 2015). A third name for the group is ISIL, the acronym for “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.”
- 4 Al-Qaeda (sometimes spelled al-Qa’ida) is “a radical Sunni Muslim organization dedicated to the elimination of a Western presence in Arab countries and militantly opposed to Western foreign policy: founded by Osama bin Laden in 1988” (Dictionary.com, n.d., *Al-Qaeda*). Al-Qaeda has several affiliated groups, such as al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula.
- 5 Boko Haram’s official name is “Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad,” which in Arabic means “People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad.” However, “residents in the north-eastern city of Maiduguri, where the group had its headquarters, dubbed it Boko Haram. Loosely translated from the region’s Hausa language, this means ‘Western education is forbidden.’ Boko Haram promotes a version of Islam which makes it ‘haram,’ or forbidden, for Muslims to take part in any political or social activity associated with Western society. This includes voting in elections, wearing shirts and trousers or receiving a secular education. Boko Haram regards the Nigerian state as being run by non-believers, regardless of whether the president is Muslim or not - and it has extended its military campaign by targeting neighbouring states” in the Lake Chad Basin of West Africa (BBC News, 2016). Boko Haram is thought to be allied with ISIS.
- 6 Al-Shabaab (also known as al-Shabab) means “The Youth” in Arabic. The Islamist group “emerged as the radical youth wing of Somalia’s now-defunct Union of Islamic Courts, which controlled Mogadishu in 2006, before being forced out by Ethiopian forces. There are numerous reports of foreign jihadists going to Somalia to help al-Shabab, from neighbouring countries, as well as the US and Europe.” Al-Shabaab is thought to be allied with al-Qaeda (BBC News, 2017).

An aerial photograph of a beach. The top half shows the dark, textured surface of the ocean meeting a wide, light-colored sandy beach. The bottom half shows a dark, rocky coastline. The text is centered in the middle of the image.

PART ONE:

YOUTH IN CONTEXT

# THE DISTORTED STARTING POINT: MALE YOUTH AS THREATS TO SOCIETY

Emotion routinely drives assessments of contemporary youth challenges. Even the central concept of “youth-related issues” brims with agitation and uncertainty about young people. The demographic phenomenon known as the “youth bulge” signifies an unusually high proportion of youth in an adult population, and the concept implies the presence of an abnormal situation that could get worse: a “bulging” youth population just might explode.<sup>7</sup>

From the start, then, the presence of large youth populations triggers alarm. Crucially, the perspective of young people routinely is separated from youth themselves. Simply through their presence, youth seem to present a problem. Kristin Lord (2016) aptly articulates the apprehension and elemental unease that so many share:

“While countries across Europe and East Asia are grappling with declining birthrates and aging populations, societies across the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia are experiencing youth booms of staggering proportions: More than half of Egypt’s labor force is younger than age 30. Half of Nigeria’s population of 167 million is between the ages of 15 and 34. In Afghanistan, Angola, Chad, East Timor, Niger, Somalia, and Uganda, more than two-thirds of the population is under the age of 25.

Since Africa and the Middle East are hotspot regions for violent extremist activity, it is worth noting Lord’s statement that:

“Africa’s current population of 200 million young people between the ages of 15 and 24 is set to double by 2045. In the Middle East, a region of some 400 million people, nearly 65 percent of the population is younger than age 30 — the highest proportion of youth to adults in the region’s history.

The youth bulge phenomenon has inspired a flurry of captivating statistical correlations. In general, they detail how the presence of large numbers of young people in many nations can lead to unsettling and perhaps devastating outcomes. “Correlations between high proportions of young people in populations and obstacles to development feed a vicious circle of poor life chances for the young,” warns the United Nations Population Fund. An agency publication also highlights “the overall correlation between high proportions of young people in populations and lower national economic and development status” (UNFPA, 2014, 9). Other correlations focus on a perceived trend toward violence by youth. These ideas were famously broadcast by Samuel Huntington (1993) and Robert D. Kaplan (1996, 2000), and they continue to resonate. “So-called ‘youth bulges,’” intones Uri Friedman (2014), “can fuel instability (especially when so many of today’s youth are unemployed and economically marginalized).” There are many

<sup>7</sup> The emotion-laden approach to youth and demography is addressed in detail by Sommers (2015), particularly pages 16 to 24.



purveyors of these ideas. Many highlight correlations between youth bulge populations and violence or social disturbance (Cincotta, Engelman, & Anastasion, 2003; Collier, Hoeffler, & Rohner, 2006; Goldstone, 2002; Mesquida & Wiener, 1999; Urdal, 2004; Zakaria, 2001). Large numbers of male youth in cities promote particular concerns about violence (Goldstone, 2010).

The pushback against (and, indeed, the reality contrasting with) such dire predictions is just as striking. The correlation between youth bulge demographics and political instability — and the related tendency to view male youth as inherently dangerous — has been challenged. The reason is that there are so many exceptions to the rule. For example:

- Most countries with youth bulge populations have not had major conflicts.
- Many youth bulge countries that have experienced war have not returned to conflict (Sommers, 2011).
- There is research indicating that large youth populations in cities *reduce* the risk of social disturbance. As Urdal and Hoelscher have found in sub-Saharan Africa, “growth in the youth population aged 15–24 is associated with a significantly lower risk of social disturbance” (2009, 17).
- The common presumption that unemployed youth spark violent unrest has been questioned directly, as the connection is difficult to prove (Cramer, 2010; Izzzi, 2013; Walton, 2010). A study by Mercy Corps, for example, has found that drivers of youth violence are tied more directly to issues of poor governance and exclusion than unemployment (Hummer, 2015).

Exactly what motivates most youth to resist engagement in violence remains underexamined. However, some research suggests that interest in the positive and peaceful roles of youth is growing (see, for example, Ankomah, 2005; Ensor, 2013; Law, Sonn, & Mackensie, 2014). United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on youth, peace, and security highlights a new shift away from views of youth largely

as violent aggressors and toward perceptions of youth as protagonists for peace (United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 2015).<sup>8</sup> The subsequent adoption in June 2018 of Security Council Resolution 2419 — which calls on “all relevant actors to consider ways for increasing the representation of young people when negotiating and implementing peace agreements” and recognizes “that their marginalization was detrimental to building sustainable peace and countering violent extremism” — supports and extends the commitment of states to partner with young people (United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 2018). The landmark new United Nations study “The Missing Peace” identifies concrete ways to build partnerships with youth, positively support them as peacebuilders, and shift the emphasis of engagement from “exclusion to meaningful inclusion” (Simpson, 2018, 21).

Despite strong evidence supporting the idea that most youth are peaceful, the perception that male youth citizens constitute a unique threat to their own societies nonetheless persists. Hannes Weber underscores this point of view: “Young men are the protagonists of virtually all violent political action as well as political extremism with a potential to threaten democracy” (2013, 335).<sup>9</sup> To be sure, the majority of those who are soldiers (as well as violent extremists) are male youth. However, the reality is that most male youth, even in conflict zones, are not soldiers. As Barker and Ricardo explain, “While the youth bulge [and violence] argument is compelling, it is important to reaffirm that in any of these settings, only a minority of young men participate in conflicts” (2006, 181). The same appears to be the case in situations of citizen violence. Following the highly and violently disputed December 2007 elections in Kenya, and despite 70 percent of those engaged in violence being youth, “only 5% of Kenya youth engaged in the violence. This highlights the reality that while youth often play major roles in violent conflict, it is typically only a small fraction of the youth population who become involved” (Kurtz, 2009, 3). A CVE expert observed in one interview that “there are countless numbers of aggrieved people all over the world who are never violent.” A great many of them are youth.

8 Resolution 2250 and the United Nations General Assembly’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism collectively constitute a potentially significant breakthrough in how youth are perceived and addressed by states, and thus they will resurface later in this paper.

9 Another example of the sort of emotional and provocative statements made about male youth, which play a role in distorting the reality that most youth are peaceful, is: “The overwhelming majority of soldiers, terrorists, criminals, European football hooligans, political radicals, rock stars, outstanding mathematicians, highest automobile insurance premium payers are men in the 15 to 29 years old age group” (Potts, Mahmood, & Graves, 2015, 507).



## YOUTH, VIOLENCE, AND THE STATE: TWO IMPORTANT CORRELATIONS

The underlying disquiet that informs so many alarming perceptions of youth emerges, in part, from the following research deficiency: the lion's share of research on large youth populations does not feature the voices of youth themselves. Most of the research on "the youth and instability thesis" (Sommers, 2011, 293) positions youth at arm's length. For the field of CVE, this research gap is especially significant given that youth (especially male youth) are the focus of so much attention and investment — and since many assumptions about youth (again, male youth in particular) are based on exceptionally incomplete evidence. All too often, when youth are discussed and analyzed, their perspectives are not part of the mix. Instead of bringing the views of young people to the fore, their contributions are quite often shut out. The result is distortions and misunderstandings about youth and gender, including the sculpting influence of masculinity.

This tendency to treat youth as a problem to address instead of actors with whom to engage drives an even more fundamental source of disquiet: widespread resistance to changing approaches to youth. The widespread intransigence of governments and international institutions to adapt policies and perspectives to youth-driven realities has created unfortunate and avoidable consequences. As explained later in this paper, the current status quo — across virtually all countries and regions where "bulging" youth populations persist — generally is not structured to work with youth, much less serve youthful citizens. In many cultural traditions, youth are not supposed to have influence. Traditional youth roles are much more

attuned to learning, obedience, and service to elders, not sharing their views on significant issues. While elders and officials may not be expected to listen to youth, they may be entirely comfortable directing how youth should think and behave.

What is crucial to consider is the following state of affairs: *youth (and particularly male youth) regularly are blamed for the challenges that large youth cohorts create.* Governments, international institutions, and many more routinely oppose the fundamental policy and practice reforms that huge youth populations demand. Many youth today want something that, in traditional terms, is radical: a voice, and influence over decisions and policies that affect them directly. However, many supporters of the status quo push back — hard — against calls for change. This routinely includes active repression, and sometimes violence, aimed directly at youth. Research has found that "governments facing a youth bulge are more repressive than other states" and that "the relationship between youth bulges and state repression is direct" (Nordås & Davenport, 2013, 926, 937). These findings directly challenge the conception of the state "as a passive actor" in countries engulfed by youth bulge populations (Nordås & Davenport, 937). It also turns the tables on the notion of youth as instigators of violence.

There also is evidence of strong connections between state violence and violent extremism. For example, research points to "a strong link between



repressive [state] security tactics and the rise of extremism” (RESOLVE Network, 2016, 8). In addition, a comprehensive study of government behavior and violence in 159 countries over 20 years revealed “strong empirical evidence that increasing levels of state sponsored violence and abuse lead to increased levels of violent extremism” by VEOs already in operation. Moreover, “countries with above average levels of state sponsored violence and abuse — defined as state-sanctioned killing, torture, disappearance and political imprisonment — double their risk of a major VEO emerging” (US Department of State Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, 2015, 1).<sup>10</sup> A CVE expert supported this assessment: “Indiscriminate punitive actions by the state are the worst thing to do, because they fuel terrorism.” A second asserted,

“When governments prevent political expression, there’s a greater chance of group violence in that society.” As a recent field study on violent extremism in Africa has found, “The research makes clear that a sense of grievance towards, and limited confidence in, government is widespread in the regions of Africa associated with the highest incidence of violent extremism” (UNDP, 2017, 5).

Taken together, the assessments suggest that non-state violence (including the actions of violent extremists) becomes more prevalent when governments outlaw peaceful dissent, and where vindictive state violence is present. Predatory government corruption has been identified as another central driver of extremist violence (Chayes, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> They also directly impact the health and behavior of ordinary people. Research with Palestinians, for example, found that exposure to “occupation-related violence and adversity is tied to increased depressive symptoms, experiences or perpetration of intimate partner violence, and experience or perpetration of sexual harassment, among other possible connections” (Kuttab & Heilman, 2017, 70).

## IV

WHO

ARE

"YOUTH"?

Discussions over what constitutes a youth invite confusion. There are three main reasons for this:

- 1 *There is no agreed age range for youth.* Probably the most common youth definition (led by United Nations agencies) is the age range of 15 to 24 (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2017).<sup>11</sup> From there, the definition begins to blur. The African Union's African Youth Charter, for example, defines youth as "every person between the ages of 15 and 35 years" (African Union Commission, 2006, 11). One of the age ranges that the Model Arab League employs is 15 to 29 (Glibbery, 2015, 1). The US Agency for International Development (USAID) employs an age range of 10 to 29.<sup>12</sup> Field research in South Sudan revealed an age range as low as 13 and as high as 50 (Sommers & Schwartz, 2011, 2).
- 2 *Youth definitions ultimately have little to do with ages.* Youth in many cultures represent the period of transition from childhood to the cusp of adulthood (Sommers, 2015, 12). However, when cultural definitions of youth and adulthood are applied to the current era, serious and significant problems arise. The reason is both simple and alarming: in much of the world, it is increasingly difficult to gain social recognition as an adult. Traditionally there are

tasks that must be achieved before societies award the title of "man" or "woman" to a young person. Eguavoen (2010) lists the key tasks or expectations as marriage, founding a family household, and supporting the family (parents as well as children) over time. As a prerequisite to marriage, male youth in farming areas may require land to build a house, while their counterparts in urban areas may need a steady income and living quarters suitable for a family (Sommers, 2015). Pastoralist male youth often must provide a negotiated number of livestock as a bride price. For example, in South Sudan, cattle often are the featured element in bride price negotiations. As one pastoralist youth in South Sudan explained, "You cannot marry without cows...and you cannot be called a man without cows" (Sommers & Schwartz, 2011, 4). In today's demanding world, such elemental accomplishments can be exceptionally difficult to pull off. As Eguavoen notes, "The group of people who fail to become social adults [that is, people recognized in society as adults] because of poverty is constantly growing in number, as well as in age" (2010, 268). As noted later in this paper, the difficulties that male youth face in gaining social acceptance as men is directly connected to recruitment into VEOs.

11 The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization observes that "age is the easiest way to define this group, particularly in relation to education and employment"; at the same time, "for statistical consistency across regions, [the United Nations] defines 'youth', as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, without prejudice to other definitions by Member States. All United Nations statistics on youth are based on this definition" (2017).

12 The rationale that USAID provides is interesting. It tries to adapt an age range to the process of youth transitioning into adulthood: "While youth development programs often focus on young people in the 15-24 year age range, the policy recognizes that USAID youth programs likely engage a broader cohort of 10 and 29 year olds; with the critical understanding that the transition from childhood to adulthood is not finite or linear and varies across and within countries" (United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2012, 2).

3 *Youth definitions do not account for the widespread phenomenon of failed (and delayed) adulthood.* Since so many young people fail to achieve the cultural and social prerequisites that are required to gain adulthood, what should they be called? Are they still youth? Singerman (2007, 6) came up with the term "waitthood" to describe youth across the Middle East "waiting" to become adults (through marriage) but unable to achieve it. Honwana (2012) subsequently adapted this concept for the entire continent of Africa. In West Africa, "youthman" has arisen as a term to describe a male adult who may appear to be a man but has yet to achieve the social status of manhood (Momoh, 1999; Utas, 2005,

150). There even is a song describing the desperate and humiliating life of "The Youthman" by Sierra Leone's Steady Bongo, also known as Lansana Sheriff (Sommers, 2015, 13).<sup>13</sup> It is apparent that the increasing difficulties in getting married plague very large numbers of young people. In the Muslim world, for example, "adulthood is still defined by marriage," and as a result, "a girl (*bint*) becomes a woman (*sit*) when she is married, whether she is sixteen or sixty" (Singerman, 2007, 8). This appears to be a significantly overlooked phenomenon. As Singerman observes, "Most demographers still believe marriage is close to universal" (2007, 8). It is not.

13 In Burundi, there is no term in the Kirundi language for an unmarried mother, seemingly because in traditional culture, it is never supposed to happen. However, since so few male youth are able to marry, unmarried motherhood is an exceptionally common situation for female youth. In the author's research, "my use of the term frequently led to discussions involving my translator and those we interviewed until the underlying idea — females, many of them adolescent girls, who had given birth to children but were not formally or even informally married — was properly understood. Several Burundian adults explained to me that, in Burundian culture, an unmarried girl or woman should never become pregnant. As a result, the concept of 'unmarried mother' does not exist in their mother tongue" (Sommers, 2013, 9). The social shame of unmarried motherhood in Burundi can inspire infanticide, secret (and dangerous) abortions, and transactional sex (Sommers, 2013, 33).

## V

## A LOOK AHEAD: SIX YOUTH ISSUES TO REMEMBER

The combination of enormous youth populations in much of the world and widespread difficulty in gaining adulthood create a context in which youth are ascendant numerically yet burdened by an unsteady social standing.<sup>14</sup> As these dual trends inform and influence the context of CVE work, there are six issues to keep in mind:

1 *Youth are ascendant across Africa, the Middle East, and beyond.* Demographers have made this point emphatically, particularly with the widespread application of the youth bulge concept. Youth populations, in fact, often are so immense that the proportion of older adults in many developing countries, in comparison, is trifling.

Accordingly, the demographic dominance of youth is such a game-changer that the idea of a “youth sector” makes little sense. The reality is virtually the reverse: programs that address agriculture, health, education, and other key development concerns are all, effectively, youth initiatives.

2 *Governments generally provide limited support to colossal cohorts of youthful citizens.* Governance issues arose as a persistent theme during interviews for this paper. “Some governments don’t want to admit that there are marginalized groups in their country,” one expert remarked. “If a government is not seen as a more legitimate provider of a future than a terrorist organization, then we have a real problem,” added another.

It is not as if rising youth populations have snuck up on governments: demographers and others have been warning about the rising tide of young citizens for decades. However, government responses to their own youth generally are underwhelming:

- + Peaceful dissent often is severely constrained or outlawed;
- + Economic inequality, together with government corruption and nepotism, may be rampant;
- + Employment opportunities outside of informal economic sectors tend to be scarce;
- + The provision of education frequently is insufficient (particularly after primary school);
- + Services and housing for expanding populations of urban youth migrants routinely are inadequate;
- + Political opportunities for youth may amount to nothing more than membership in subordinate wings of parties; and
- + The social status of youth (noted earlier) is tenuous and often embarrassing.

Police officers, in addition, may be the most apparent sign of a government’s awareness of youth populations, particularly in cities. Indeed, there are indications that state law enforcement tends to be oriented toward serving the interests

<sup>14</sup> This unusual combination directly informed the title and central irony of *The Outcast Majority: War, Development, and Youth in Africa*: “While youth are demographically dominant, most see themselves as members of an outcast minority” (Sommers, 2015, 3).

of governments and elites, not ordinary citizens (Haugen & Boutros, 2014). Rarely is this state of affairs comforting to young people.

- 3 *Prospects for youth violence are grossly overstated — and highly gendered.* As noted earlier, the share of youth cohorts who end up in gangs, militias, or VEOs remains quite small. Researchers and governments alike often focus on a suspicion of latent violence within male youth that is primed to explode. The fact that it very rarely does — even as state violence is so often directed at them — points to precisely the opposite of what is feared: an accent on resistance to violence by most male (as well as female) youth. The destructive stereotyping of male youth as violent points to the need both to position masculinity as a fundamental gender concern, assess its formidable influence on societies and cultures accurately, and find ways to tap into the peaceful resistance of most youth.
- 4 *The gender dimensions of youth (and CVE) issues often contain distortions.* The sex of most combatants in militia groups, armies, gangs, and VEOs tend to be male. This issue helps explain why many of the CVE experts interviewed for this paper reported that “youth” contains a common unspoken reference to male youth. The other issue concerns “gender,” which does not often refer to male youth or men. Although male youth strive to attain manhood just as female youth seek to achieve womanhood, many CVE experts interviewed for this paper stated that the primary inherent meaning of “gender” is women.

Commentary on the implicit meanings of gender and youth is revealing. For example, one expert remarked that “implicitly, we’re mostly talking about boys [regarding the concept ‘youth’]” while mention of gender means that “we’re mostly talking about women and girls.” “I have noticed that when you talk of decision-makers, most see ‘youth’ as males,” a second CVE expert observed. “For the most part, ‘youth’ equals male youth,” while “in practice, the orientation of ‘gender’ is only women. The majority of people [in the fields of CVE and international development] see ‘gender’ as women or women’s rights.” A third CVE expert stated, “If there are no males in a youth program, it’s not a youth program.” Such views were widely

shared by CVE experts. They have been found to be just as common among international development professionals (Sommers, 2015). Significantly, neither the “youth” nor “gender” category includes female youth: in practice, they appear to be routinely overlooked.

An additional implied meaning for “youth” appears to exist in the CVE world. As one CVE expert and practitioner stated, “youth” effectively refers to “people vulnerable to recruitment. You don’t get older people being recruited [into VEOs].” A second CVE expert supported this assessment: “Youth are the ones being radicalized: they’re the demographic at risk.”

- 5 *Significant class distinctions within youth populations frequently are overlooked.* One of the most common and potent divisions within youth populations concerns social class. Suspicion between elite and non-elite (or poor) youth may be significant, and their priorities and outlooks may differ significantly. Still, it is not unusual for governments and international agencies to pluck and recognize eloquent, compelling, and often unthreatening elite youth as “leaders” or providers of a “youth voice.” Such an approach invites significant distortions in understanding youth concerns. As a veteran youth and conflict expert summed it up, “Elite youth will never be role models for poor youth” (Utas, 2012, 4).

A second class-related concern is the so-called “elite capture” issue. Interviews with international development professionals surfaced “reports of intentional favoritism in the selection of youth program participants and knowing acquiescence to nepotistic practices by local officials” (Sommers, 2015, 165). While it is difficult to know the extent of such practices and tendencies, a veteran CVE expert divided youth populations into two groups: “reachables” and “unreachables.” The expert defined reachables as “either self-selected youth leaders or just the ones who are willing to come talk to us.” However, the expert contended, “The unreachable are our target audience” — but the problem is “we don’t know how to talk to them. We don’t know their avenues of communication or what makes them tick.” This challenge is addressed directly in the recommendations section.



- 6 *Youth humiliation and exclusion often are significant — and local community leaders frequently support the marginalization of youth.* Youth humiliation often connects to the widespread inability to gain social acceptance as adults and instead endure reputations as “failed” men and women. The range of ways that youth can be excluded is breathtaking. Analysis for one study, for example, revealed five “major structural factors that appear to underlie youth exclusion”:
- + Un- and underemployment and lack of livelihood opportunities;
  - + Insufficient, unequal, and inappropriate education and skills;
  - + Poor governance and weak political participation;
  - + Gender inequalities and socialization; and
  - + Legacy of past violence (McLean Hilker & Fraser, 2009, 4).

Youth struggles and difficulties can be compounded by older leaders in what are considered communities (often defined as a rural village). Such leaders may not approve of youth who resist their leadership or behave in ways that leaders disapprove of. Former youth combatants returning to rural villages, for example, are renowned for having difficulty gaining social acceptance (see, for example, Coulter, 2009). A veteran NGO official noted that a common international development practice for accessing youth in communities is to “talk to the elders. The elders help you find the youth. Those in youth groups are visible and they’re the ones doing things. Those youth are already connected” (Sommers, 2015, 165). In such cases, community leaders may support practices and promote attitudes that marginalize, exclude, or overlook young people they do not favor or do not receive their approval. Accessing youth via community leaders, in other words, can severely limit access to youth.

These six issues make the youth context for CVE work both exceptionally important and challenging. The combination of unprecedented populations of youth in Africa, the Middle East, and many other parts of the globe – together with difficult circumstances facing a great many female and male youth — sets the stage for a thorny set of circumstances for governments and those concerned with CVE or development (or both). The inability or reluctance of governments to meet glaring youth needs effectively raises questions about their ability and legitimacy. Additionally, the stringent traditional manhood and womanhood expectations can make prospects for gaining social recognition as an adult remote, if not virtually nonexistent.

As many youth face seemingly inescapable adversity, and with little or no voice in political or social spheres, openings abound for non-state actors to enter the fray. Some of them, of course, are VEOs. Even so, and as noted earlier, relatively few “outcast majority” youth sign up for violence — but some do. Given their circumstances, they appear to be an easy target.





PART TWO:  
YOUTH  
IN  
COUNTERING  
VIOLENT EXTREMISM

# DEFINITIONS OF COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM: IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH

Defining what CVE means is a source of considerable debate. While a complete analysis of all of the various definitions is unnecessary for this study, it is useful to probe this subject just a bit. Examining meanings of CVE, and of related concepts, helps identify where youth are seen to fit within the field.

An examination of CVE begins by investigating the meaning of “violent extremism,” which is generally imprecise. For example, a joint strategy document from the US Department of State and USAID does not explicitly define violent extremism, instead inferring that Da’esh (or ISIS), al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (an affiliated sub-group of al-Qaeda), al-Shabaab, and Boko Haram drive violent extremism because they are key threats to US national security interests overseas.<sup>15</sup> The document also implies the terms “terrorist groups” and “violent extremists” refer to the same actors, as well as makes plain that a particular target of violent extremist groups is youth: these actors “recruit, radicalize, and mobilize people — especially young people — to engage in terrorist acts” (USAID, 2016, 3).

With this in mind, the document defines the practice of CVE as “proactive actions to counter efforts by violent extremists to radicalize, recruit, and mobilize followers to violence and to address specific factors that facilitate violent extremist recruitment to violence.” CVE work includes youth engagement, which features support for “programs that build a sense of belonging, community and purpose” among youth, as well as initiatives that “train and mobilize youth to serve as leaders in their community and globally in the work of CVE” (US Department of State & USAID, 2016, 4, 10).

Three inferences can be drawn from this description of CVE:

- First, only non-state actors are considered violent extremists. Although governments can be supporters of VEOs, they are not violent extremists themselves no matter how violent or extreme a government is. This is a crucial perspective for this study, since the issue of governance was unusually prominent in CVE literature and interviews with CVE experts.<sup>16</sup>

15 Despite the particular attention that CVE effectively pays to violent extremists in the Islamic world, it is notable that only a small number of experts interviewed for this paper highlighted the general connection between the practice of CVE and Islamist extremist groups. One expert (working for a practitioner NGO) contended that CVE practitioners “are unsophisticated about the role of religion in CVE. We say it’s not an underlying driver, and most NGOs shy away from it. That’s a problem.” For another, “CVE is a euphemism for Islamic violent politics. CVE refers to the kinds of threats that the US is facing now, especially since [September 11, 2001].” The expert perceives the focus of CVE work to be on “Islamic fascists” who “want to deploy violent revolutionary means to achieve their goals.” The expert contrasted that with the attention paid to Islamist violent extremists with extremist groups of other religions, which are not the central focus of CVE. Of course, this orientation is double-sided. For example, Cilliers notes, “The rise of Islamist terror globally...is a reflection of global developments. Western support for regimes with repressive domestic policies (such as those of Saudi Arabia and Egypt) have come full circle. The impact of a globally networked world allows local issues to be presented as part of a global narrative, hence providing an additional lease of life and salience to domestic drivers of discontent.” Cilliers concludes that both al-Qaeda and ISIS “have the US most prominently in their sights” (2015, 25).

16 It also is an issue that attracts considerable attention. One expert drew on Somalia as an example, asserting that “all five regions are being run by violent extremists.” He defined a VEO as those who “don’t want to compromise or be ruled by others, and they use violence if they feel threatened.” In Somalia, the expert reported that al-Shabaab grew in influence partly because many viewed the government as illegitimate (“foreign-imposed and propped up by Christian Ethiopia”) while “government soldiers extorted and raped.” Some Somalis also viewed the government as “having extreme policies, not being interested in dialogue or reconciliation, and criminalizing dissent.” Taken together, the expert asked, “Why should there be a pure focus on non-state actors” in the field of CVE? The same expert also argued, “The norm in many parts of the world is not peaceful. It’s where violence is wielded by governments, private militias, and gangsters” — and if someone is despised by their government, the police, and the military, then joining a rebel group could be seen as a rational choice. Such views underscore the prominence of governance in the work of CVE.

- Second, the concept of community is not defined — despite the fact that communities are the primary venue for most CVE work. “Community” in international development work commonly refers to a rural village (and, secondarily, to an urban neighborhood). Often, they are run by older elite adults (sometimes called “elders”). The status of many youth in such environments can be negligible at best. As the notion of a community — and whether youth belong to communities — is of considerable importance, the issue is revisited later in this paper.
- Third, the gender of the “young people” and “youth” referred to in the document is unspecified. While it might be presumed that the references point exclusively toward male youth, evidence increasingly demonstrates how female youth play a diversity of roles in VEOs. In addition, given the gendered roles that young people play in society, effective CVE responses call for gendered responses to female and male youth concerns.

In the relevant literature and during interviews, conflicting ideas about what CVE means emerged as a consistent theme. It is notable that many involved in debates over the meaning and purpose of CVE (and fields relating to CVE) do not mention youth explicitly. Three major themes emerged from analysis on the meaning of CVE. They are detailed here with an eye to whether (and how) youth figure into the discussion:

- *Definition Questions:* The general framework for CVE is debated. Writing in 2016, one set of CVE researchers determined there is “no single, authoritative definition that encompassed all of [CVE’s] facets.” The authors added, “The lack of a cohesive definition causes counterproductive programs and unclear results” (Challgren et al., 2016, 7). Another analyst characterized the CVE field as “diffuse, unfocused, yet expansive” and “a catch-all category that lacks precision and focus” (Heydemann, 2014, 1–2).

In a way, envisioning CVE as a catchall category allows CVE inquiry and action to encompass a wide array of activities. Essentially, this seems to have occurred. The debates over a specific definition, moreover, appear to have been usurped by

pragmatism. For example, in the United Nations General Assembly’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, there are no specific definitions for PVE (CVE’s sister field) or violent extremism. Instead, the action plan merely states that “violent extremism is a diverse phenomenon, without clear definition” before recommending an expansive, ambitious plan featuring “a focus on preventive measures for addressing violent extremism” (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, 1, 3).<sup>17</sup>

- *CVE and CT:* In the practice of CVE, efforts are made to counter VEOs and prevent youth from becoming violent extremists (or, in some cases, enabling youth to return safely from service as a violent extremist). The approach contrasts with counterterrorism, for which force is employed to attack VEOs — some of who may be youthful fighters.

Reflecting on the relationship between CVE and counterterrorism, one analyst commented, “Whether [CVE] exists as a subset or evolution of counterterrorism (CT) policy and practice depends on where one sits.” For this analyst, the CVE-counterterrorism connection is strong: “CVE emerged from and does, for the most part, remain parked — programmatically and conceptually — in the international and national security policymaking community as part of a broader effort to counter terrorism” (Holmer, 2013, 2). If this is true, then at best it constitutes an awkward starting point for youth engagement via CVE efforts since counterterrorism work focuses on aggression and violence toward VEOs (often including their youth) and not on preventing the underlying reasons for violent extremism.

A second set of analysts expressed deep concern about the relationship between CVE and security actors. One author contends, “CVE is doing too little to transform the hard security approaches that drive many into the arms of violent groups” (Attree, 2017, 2). An expert summed up the difference between counterterrorism and CVE approaches in a different way: Counterterrorism “is a delay mechanism, a disruption, a form of defense, the last resort” against terrorism; “it’s what you do when nothing else works. It’s not a solution,” and it “doesn’t address the drivers of terrorism.” In the view of the expert, this

17 PVE and the action plan are considered again later in this section.

is the issue that CVE addresses. However, in areas where counterterrorism operations currently are underway, or where people retain strong memories of prior counterterrorism actions, this creates considerable challenges for CVE efforts.

An important apparent difference between the practice of counterterrorism and CVE (and PVE) is worth highlighting here. While counterterrorism tracks its adversaries carefully, CVE often does not. The programs and practices of CVE (as well as PVE) often are nonspecific and not customized to the tactics, tendencies, and strategies of local violent extremist adversaries.

- *CVE, PVE, and international development:* Although CVE and PVE appear to describe separate but complementary fields,<sup>18</sup> practical realities and meanings play a much bigger role on the ground. Analysis of relevant documents, and interviews that touched on this issue, revealed two general positions on the CVE-PVE issue:
  - + Some argue that CVE and PVE refer to the same field. Still, the two fields collectively may create challenges for other practitioners. As two analysts observe, “CVE/PVE’s concern with the structural drivers of violent extremism brings it into contact with what has traditionally been the realm of those working on human rights, development, and peacebuilding. Although this linkage is in principle to be welcomed, the concept of CVE/PVE continues to make many active in these fields nervous” (Frazer & Nünlist, 2015, 3).
  - + However, some in the development field assert the opposite: that the two fields differ significantly. As an expert with extensive field experience explained, many practitioners believe that “CVE is too close to [counterterrorism]. Development people, for the most part, don’t feel comfortable with the CVE label. They prefer PVE.” The expert’s rationale for this preference is that “PVE is a development approach, as it addresses root causes that stop [violent extremist] groups from coming into being.” Those endorsing

a longer-term approach to violent extremism work thus may aim to address a wide array of large-scale, traditional development concerns. Reportedly, some development practitioners relate this approach to PVE, not CVE.

The suggested emphasis of development practitioners (and many CVE and PVE practitioners) on addressing the root causes of violent extremism is worthy of reflection. The reason is that the primary drivers (or root causes)<sup>19</sup> of violent extremism often have locally specific sources. Their connection to traditional fields of development work may be indirect. Poverty, access to health and education services, and unemployment — to name examples of challenges that traditional development work tackles — are all concerns that need to be addressed for solid, development-related reasons. However, they frequently are not direct causes of violent extremism. In addition, significant deficiencies within mainstream development and peacebuilding approaches toward youth-driven challenges have been identified (see, for example, Cramer, 2010; Izzi, 2013; Hummer, 2015; Sommers, 2015).

What is crucial is the following: *CVE and development are not the same thing.* While the work of CVE is inherently and explicitly connected to security concerns, mainstream development practice quite often is not. Connecting the two runs the risk of politicizing development work, which may be counterproductive and is unwise. Action that directly connects to peacebuilding probably should be handled with particular care since local interpretations of programs and advocacy can determine or undermine their success. Search for Common Ground proposes a way forward in such delicate circumstances, advocating for adapting a conflict-transformation approach to challenges posed by non-state violent extremist groups. The NGO confidently asserts that transforming violent extremism differs from CVE because, where CVE “is reactive to extremist violence,” their approach aims at “altering the dynamics that motivate it” (2017, 4). One key to such an approach, it would appear, is how people on the ground perceive such actions.

18 *Countering* violent extremism implies that VEOs already are present and must be counteracted, while *preventing* violent extremism points to proactive work taking place in areas where VEOs are not active — but have the potential to enter the scene.

19 Those involved in CVE work often prefer the term “driver” to “root cause” because causation is not direct between poverty and unemployment on the one hand and radicalization on the other.



There are important overlaps in the efforts within the two broad fields — CVE and PVE on the one hand, and development, human rights, and peacebuilding on the other. For example, governance challenges (such as state violence and state corruption) impact the work of both sets of actors and their efforts. In such cases, coordinating the actions of CVE and PVE actors with those of their development, human rights, and peacebuilding counterparts promises to address shared aims.

*Regardless of how the field of CVE is approached, two broad issues shine through. First, violent extremist groups — particularly those that threaten Western nations — naturally have attracted considerable attention. CVE represents a means for addressing the threat and danger posed by VEOs. Second, although stopping youth from joining VEOs is a fundamental aim of CVE, explicit mention of youth as the primary target group — much less partners in CVE — remains infrequent.*

An important exception to this trend is the United Nations General Assembly's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism. The plan makes clear that an effective and sustainable response to violent extremism requires a dramatically changed approach toward youth:

“ We will not be successful unless we can harness the idealism, creativity and energy of young people and others who feel disenfranchised. Young people, who constitute the majority of the population of an increasing number of countries today, must be viewed as an asset and must be empowered to make a constructive contribution to the political and economic development of their societies and nations. They represent an untapped resource. We must offer them a positive vision of their future together with a genuine chance to realize their aspirations and potential (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, 3–4).

The United Nations Secretary-General's action plan addresses youth challenges in terms similar to United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250,<sup>20</sup> which includes the following:

“ *Recognizing that youth should actively be engaged in shaping lasting peace and contributing to justice and reconciliation, and that a large youth population presents a unique demographic dividend that can contribute to lasting peace and economic prosperity if inclusive policies are in place (United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 2015).*

Taken together, the two United Nations documents underscore a promising trend toward viewing youth in a different light — and emphasize the responsibility of governments (among others) to alter their approach to and relationship with youthful citizens.

20 United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 was adopted on December 9, 2015 — 16 days prior to the release of the United Nations Secretary-General's action plan.

## VII

# ELUSIVE YOUTH: SEARCHING FOR THE FEW WHO JOIN

The community-based approach, which is popular with CVE practitioners, routinely is employed by violent extremist groups as well. One veteran CVE practitioner noted, “In Mali, Somalia, and Syria, people join violent extremist groups because communities recruit for them.” Youth effectively become part of an exchange between VEOs and community leaders. In unstable areas, where “the community has to accept a violent extremist group for protection,” community leaders also “select youth to join the violent extremist group: if communities don’t accept violent extremist groups, it’s hard for the groups to recruit youth.” A key to community acceptance is for violent extremist groups to provide essential services (schools and health care in addition to protection). This illustrates an important means through which youth join VEOs: forced or coercive recruitment within their communities. This phenomenon generally was not found to be the central focus of research on either the attraction to VEOs or CVE practice. Accordingly, the emphasis in this section is on the relatively few youth who decide to join a VEO.

Within this context, it is useful to return to a fundamental CVE challenge: the difficulty in predicting which youth will join a violent extremist group. “We don’t know who will become [a violent extremist],” remarked one CVE expert who was interviewed. “Research has nothing to say about who is likely to radicalize in any specific way.” A second expert noted that the level of understanding remains limited. “We can account for 30 percent of the variants that can predict why youth join violent extremist groups. But 70 percent of the variants are unexplained, and you’ll never get to 100 percent.” One researcher noted that researchers searching for a terrorist profile still do

not “understand why so few people actually engage in terrorist activity given the large number of people who are exposed to the same apparent antecedents” (Bux, 2007, 270). Another study on this subject concluded the results of their research “underscore how little we know about why some individuals choose to become terrorists and others do not” (Cragin, Bradley, Robinson, & Steinberg, 2015, 16). The lack of clarity about CVE’s primary target group necessarily makes the practice of countering or preventing recruitment into a VEO a vague and imprecise endeavor.

Signs of progress have been noted in knowledge gathered about why certain youth join VEOs (while most don’t). For example, one recent analysis found “waning interest in simplistic root-cause explanations of why individuals become violent extremists (e.g., poverty, lack of education, marginalization, foreign occupation, and religious fervor)” (Atran, Axelrod, Davis, & Fischhoff, 2017, 353). At the same time, the underlying answers tend to be complex and elusive. As another analyst found, “No one risk factor explained involvement in violent extremism” (Weine, 2013, 85).

Despite the fact that nailing down precisely what motivates youth to join violent extremist groups remains elusive, the following themes that especially resonate with youth surfaced in this review of relevant literature and interviews with CVE experts:

- 1 *Relative deprivation.* In one research endeavor, researchers found that “it was not poor socio-economic status itself that pointed toward susceptibility [to joining a VEO], but rather a sense



of relative deprivation, coupled with feelings of political and/or social exclusion” (Norman & Mikhael, 2017). Relative deprivation also surfaced as particularly significant in the research of another analyst, who found, “Absolute deprivation is not the real challenge. The more challenging question, particularly in the Arab world, is relative deprivation: the absence of opportunities relative to expectations” (Taşpinar, 2009, 78).

- 2 *A sense of purpose:* There is a strong current of thinking that revolves around action. “Violent extremism is about action. Most youth want action, and if it’s not channeled, then it can go toward joining a violent extremist group.” One analyst sharpened the argument and inserted a religious dimension: While female and male youth attracted to joining extreme Muslim jihadist movements may be among the many who are alienated and marginalized, those who join are motivated by a search for companionship, esteem, meaning, empowerment, glory, and the thrill of action — not dire economic straits (Atran, 2010). A CVE expert who was interviewed shared a similar interpretation: “When youth feel disempowered, they look for an ideology that starts with personal purification. People forget that a lot of Islam is about personal purity, where ‘pure’ means you are not corrupted.” One researcher also has noted “the greatest predictor of willingness to sacrifice is joining comrades in a sacred cause, which gives them a special destiny and the will to fight. That is what enables initially low-power insurgent and revolutionary groups [such as VEOs] to resist and often prevail against materially more powerful foes” (Atran, 2015).

Relationships and networks involving youth can fuel their engagement with VEOs. Such groups may set up shop in ungoverned spaces, using them “as a staging ground for international attacks” and “to recruit uneducated and impoverished young men with no prospects” (Taşpinar, 2009, 78, 82). The attraction of violent extremist groups, for some young people, can be substantial: one CVE expert considers ISIS “the strongest counter-culture movement since World War II. There’s always been racism and oppression,” the expert observed. “But now, there’s a jihad: ISIS jihadis are saying that infidel, atheist, hegemonic elites are against us [that is, true Muslims].” In the ISIS line of thinking,

becoming a jihadist provides a young person with a heroic purpose for his or her life. Their rationale, according to the expert, is that “the Islamic State will give you meaning and help you empower yourself and others.” ISIS promotes their work as an opportunity to “do something good and great and glorious.” This feeds into the need of youth for “a feeling and vision of transcendence.” One ISIS recruitment pitch to youth, the expert continued, sums up their approach: “Come to Syria to suffer and save the world.”

- 3 *The power of poetry:* Militant jihadist poetry is one way that ISIS and al-Qaeda recruit youth to join their forces. One CVE expert has researched this, finding “the Islamic State [ISIS] uses poetry with simple language. They use them with music to accompany videos. The simpler [Arabic] language is more accessible to foreign fighters.” In contrast, al-Qaeda “has lots of incredibly talented poets, which is considered a manly pursuit.” In general, jihadist groups “use a more ‘Shakespearean’ type of Arabic to give them an air of legitimacy. They’ll take verses from famous poets from the Golden Era of Islamic Poetry [est. 500–1,200 BCE] and insert new versions into the traditional verse format.” For example, poems may refer to a “city of evil,” which refers to either New York City or Washington, DC. Another example is changing “burning trees” in a poem into “burning towers,” a direct reference to al-Qaeda’s coordinated terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center towers in New York on September 11, 2001.

The upshot of this clever manipulation of classical Arabic poetry, the CVE expert concluded, is “to change your mindset, to think that terrorist attacks are predestined and the acts are part of Islamic heritage.” This means of recruiting youth to join a jihadist group may appeal in particular to desert communities since, the expert explained, they “are very focused on poetry. Desert Arabs can remember huge, lengthy poems. They have an amazing collective memory.”

- 4 *Female youth dynamics:* Strikingly, literature on CVE reviewed for this paper, in addition to interview commentary from CVE experts, makes scant mention of female youth. This is a significant oversight. First, it suggests that the concept of “youth” equates exclusively with male youth. Second, it implies that the counterpart to a male

youth is a young woman. However, the designation of “woman” implies that the title has been achieved and is uncontested — which, as noted earlier, quite often is not the case. This is important because it ignores the difficulty in achieving socially accepted womanhood. The current research emphasis on the roles of women (including female youth) would enhance its precision if the concept of youth (and the issue of marriage) were combined with the ages of those who carry out various roles. While it is clear that female recruits into VEOs generally are youth, those women who are active in CVE work appear to include, or even feature, much older women. Shedding light on such significant differences is necessary because while the VEO recruits may share the same gender, their life experience and status in society may differ radically.

The disconcerting tendency to refer to female youth either as “women” or “young women” further scrambles understandings of gender dynamics. This takes place as research on the involvement of females in terrorist violence is fueling efforts to reevaluate existing notions of gender and violence (Gowrinathan, 2014; see also Bloom, 2011; Cragin & Daly, 2009). In fact, some believe the role of females in VEOs is foundational. For example, one CVE expert explained that a central role that females typically play in VEOs is as a networker — social connectors who link people within VEOs to each other. “The networks would collapse without women to do the networks,” the expert said. Females also have an advantage: they often are overlooked as security threats. “Security forces don’t see women as a threatening group,” explained a second CVE expert with extensive field experience. “So, women can play a very positive role for [violent extremist] groups.” The implication in all of these analyses is that these women are youthful.

A second area of confusion arises from the tendency to equate “gender” with “women” — often to the near or complete exclusion of men and male youth. This is illustrated in “The Role of Gender in Violent Extremism,” a paper opening with the statement that “understanding the role of women is in many ways challenging” and focusing on women and girls in its entirety (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2015, 1). Similarly, a review of literature on violent extremism and gender in Kenya finds that “a gender specific dimension has been largely

missing.” The authors’ frame of reference for gender is “women’s involvement in [violent extremist] groups,” a vital issue in need of significantly more attention and regard (Sahgal & Zeuthen, 2018, 14). At the same time, gender concerns regarding VEOs and masculinity receive limited attention.

There also is an effort to advocate for empowering women within the CVE field because, as one analyst asserts, women “are uniquely positioned as purveyors of affirmative change” and have the potential to “be extremely effective in detecting early warning signs of mobilization as well as affecting factors that contribute to radicalization.” Women thus “can serve as extraordinarily effective bulwarks against extremism” (Couture, 2014, 1, 50). This take on the role of women is contested. For example, one set of authors has found “there is little evidence that women have a moderating influence on militancy” (Alan et al., 2015, 5). Both of these takes on women lack nuance and imply women’s involvement in violent extremism can be summarized fairly easy. However, research on the various ways women, and female youth, are caught up in violent extremism suggests the reality is varied and complex.

A related debate concerns whether gender-specific roles and motivations play a part in activities relating to violent extremism and CVE. Some assert the differences are marginal. One analyst, for instance, describes women as performing roles in “preventing, promoting and participating in violent extremism” (Carter, 2013, 1). In other words, women appear to play virtually the same sorts of roles as men. In the realm of CVE, a set of authors asserts that “there does not appear to be a distinct difference in the role that women can play in CVE compared to men” (Denoix de Saint Marc & Lacombe, 2016, 174). The authors of still another study write, “The major push factors we have tracked that prime Western females to migrate to ISIS-controlled territory are often similar, if not the same, as their male counterparts” (Saltman & Frenett, 2016, 146).

It is important to note that evidence running counter to these assessments is substantial and convincing. One analyst, writing in 2007, stated that female involvement in al-Qaeda “is at a formative stage but is on the rise, with women following a gender-specific interpretation of radical

ideology, the female jihad, by acting as facilitators, supporters, and educators for the movement” (Von Knop, 2007; cited in Carter, 2013, 6). A second set of analysts found that, for example, female recruits into ISIS who came from Western nations “see hope in the mission of ISIS,” believing that the territory held by ISIS “will develop into the Islamic utopia they have been promised.” In practical terms, “the women are aware that they are the key to ensuring that there is a next generation to this caliphate, contributing to ISIS’s state-building, as mothers, nurses or teachers” (Saltman & Frenett, 2016, 148). Taken together, the studies suggest that both for al-Qaeda and ISIS, women (or, more specifically, female youth) mainly contribute to their cause by carrying out traditionally female duties.

A range of recent studies on women and girls’ engagement in violent extremism in Kenya highlights their engagement with and direct impact from VEOs.<sup>21</sup> One study found that “women and girls play a prominent role as recruiters in the Al-Shabaab network” (Badurdeen, 2018, 19). A second revealed many ways in which “women’s involvement in [violent extremism] was not static but dynamic,” including how some “women are recruited into [violent extremist] organizations by boyfriends and husbands” (Mwakimako, 2018, 66). A third found that “young Muslim women in higher learning institutions have become easy targets for recruitment by radical groups such as ISIS and Al-Shabaab”; “religion and marriage have been used to radicalize and recruit young educated Muslim women in universities within Nairobi and its environs” (Ali, 2018, 91–92). A fourth focused on wives who became widows after their husbands joined a VEO. The negative impacts were expansive, reaching “into physical, economic, structural, psycho-social and emotional” dimensions of the widows’ lives (Shauri, 2018, 96). Still another examined women’s roles as “planners, financiers, and recruiters” for al-Shabaab (Ogenga, 2016, 3). The study revealed a profile of the women recruits: between 19 and 21, predominately Muslim and well-educated, and from urban, middle-class families; they also included Muslim women of Somali descent — a characteristic that appears to have been the most significant.

The primary underlying reason again returns us to the significance of governance. The author notes, “Relations between the police and people of Somali descent in Kenya have always been characterized by suspicion.” This state of affairs “has been worsened by the entry of concerns about terrorism” since “Somalis are perceived to be the key suspects of instances of terrorism.” The result has been “a tendency towards ‘collective punishment’ by the state and human rights abuses in the name of counterterrorism.” Add to the mix that “women are the worst affected by these heavy-handed state responses and human rights abuses due to [the] widespread gender subordination of women in Kenya’s political economy in general” (Ogenga, 2016, 4).

The growing evidence of women and female youth being manipulated and exploited by VEOs calls for a significant increase in research on this gender-specific dimension of violent extremism. It also requires programming and advocacy that is customized to the priorities and pressures that make some female youth unusually vulnerable to the predation of VEOs and to the potential social fallout due to engagement with or connection to a VEO. As the following examination indicates, corollary gender-specific research and programming for their male counterparts also is required. These issues will be revisited at the end of this report.

- 5 *Male youth dynamics*: It is challenging to address the expanse of gender-related issues in the literature when many are overlooked or distorted. For some analysts, the gathered research suggests that gender issues have little or no influence on violent extremism. While some analysts highlight research on women and female youth to make this point, others draw from investigations of male youth (usually referred to as “young men”) to support this argument. “Although most violent extremists are young men,” one set of analysts write, “there is little convincing research to suggest that ideals of masculinity and honour play a significant role in causing violent extremism.” This comment is based on a judgment call: existing research on gender and violent extremism does not convince the analysts, who conclude that “gender issues do not appear to be significant” (Alan et al., 2015, 2). This

21 Only one of the five studies referenced here (Shauri, 2018) makes direct reference to female youth.

is notable given the preponderance of evidence to the contrary. Perhaps unsurprisingly, expressions of considerable frustration over the status quo in counterterrorism and CVE work are not uncommon. The following shot across the bow is illustrative: “Counterterrorism experts and officials (the majority of whom are male) have mostly been oblivious to the gender-specific dimensions of violent extremism” (Millar, 2015, 9).

*Evidence gathered for this discussion paper strongly suggests that gender issues are significant and broadly evident.* It also appears that the common connection between “gender” and “women” has overshadowed the issue of masculinity for male youth (and in society more broadly) in the literature on VEO recruitment concerns. This is curious, because VEOs’ efforts to appeal to masculinity issues in their recruitment of male youth appear remarkably strong. One analyst seeking to “encourage us to turn our gaze to men” instead of women in violent extremism highlights the significance of “men who cannot meet traditional expectations of masculinity — such as bread winner, respect and honor, wealth, access to sexual partners of choice — may precisely find that radical or extremist political mobilization offers a compelling substitute for regular masculinity authentication.” This issue is in play because “terrorist/violent extremist groups manipulate gender stereotypes to recruit men and women,” with the analyst then noting how “ISIS notably employs hypermasculine images to portray its fighters, as well as promised access to sexual gratification, marriage and guaranteed income as a reward for the glory of fighting. These motifs have proven indisputably alluring to marginalized men whose capacity to access any similar social capital or status in their own communities will be extremely limited” (Ní Aoláin, 2016).<sup>22</sup>

ISIS appears to pay particular attention to masculinity and humiliation in its recruitment work. Two analysts examine how “extremists exploit this ‘quest for significance’...by speaking about Muslims’ collective humiliation at the hands of Western powers and their Muslim allies,”<sup>23</sup> although they highlight how ISIS “directly challenge[s] a male’s masculinity and shames him [into joining] their cause or commit attacks against the West.” Among their tactics are to employ “women and children as messengers of shame and emasculation” (Beutel & Perez, 2016). Similarly, among the reported recruitment tactics of the Taliban in Afghanistan is inviting male youth to “‘man up’ and take action” (Ahmadi, 2015, 3). More broadly, one analyst asserts, “It is difficult not to conclude that masculinity is a key force that underwrites and sustains extremism. In terrorism, we are witnessing a very specific configuration of the passage into manhood” (Plummer, 2014).

Recent research on this issue supports this broad finding. Kimmel (2018) has found that it is “aggrieved entitlement — entitlement thwarted and frustrated — that leads some men to search for a way to redeem themselves as men, to restore and retrieve that sense of manhood that has been lost.” As a result, “joining up is a form of masculine compensation, an alternate route to proving manhood.” Hudson and Matfess found that:

“ The demands of brideprice in places where the economy is stagnating or jobs are scarce leave young men with few options. Without an income, they cannot get a wife; without a wife, they cannot be regarded as so-called real men in their patrilineal society. For many young men, the only means to accumulate the assets needed to marry may be looting, raiding, or joining a rebel or terrorist group (2017, 37).

- 22 Ní Aoláin (2016) also highlights the significance of hegemonic masculinity in the context of men — or, more specifically, male youth — who attempt to establish their manhood: “It seems particularly important to me that we better understand why factors associated with hegemonic masculinity strongly correlate towards radicalization and the capacity for violent mobilization. Hegemonic masculinity ideals originate through a combination of cultural expectations and social realities. They include the expectation that men are family patriarchs, and that men are defined in comparison to other men whom they seek to surpass in status, wealth, piety, number of children and social standing. Hegemonic masculinity also includes strong incentives towards masculine performance, including the acceptance and use of violence. In the context of terrorism, radicalism and extremism it is critical to recognize the ways in which these sites enable men to authenticate their masculinity through the performance of and rewards for violence.”
- 23 A prominent historic example of this is the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916. The bitterness and turmoil it generated is briefly described in a BBC News report entitled “Sykes-Picot: The Map that Spawned a Century of Resentment” (Muir, 2016).

Two words of caution are worthy of note. First, it is important to remember that most youth — female as well as male — resist engagement with VEOs. Despite compelling reasons to join a VEO, most youth do not. Second, it is useful to reflect on the following advice regarding programming for CVE: “The best protection against these emotional predations [facing male youth] are when communities and male leaders within them promote and sustain healthy notions of masculinity and manhood,” and notably, healthy notions feature removing the common use of violence as a demonstration of masculine strength (Beutel & Perez, 2016). This advice is supported by the following policy recommendation for programming: “The prevailing forms of engagement of humanitarian and development agencies routinely overlook

men’s vulnerabilities or give them low priority. In some cases, they pursue interventions that address female vulnerabilities but compound or worsen male vulnerabilities, thus deepening male humiliation and possibly undermining family resilience” (Gardner & El-Bushra, 2016, 8).

A prominent trait in the literature reviewed for this paper is that youth are not an emphatic focus of research relating to violent extremism. This is notable because youth overwhelmingly are the central targets of recruitment by VEOs. Current knowledge of the primary CVE target group — what it’s like to be a female or male youth in areas where violent extremists are active or are vulnerable to violent extremist activity — is insufficient.



## VIII

# THE WORK OF COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM: FOUR OBSERVATIONS

The work of CVE is not easy to do. Frequently, it calls for addressing sensitive personal issues, and the environments in which activities take place may be high risk. The CVE field also is haunted by fundamental challenges such as the absence of an agreed-upon definition of CVE practice. Drawing on interviews with CVE experts and a review of literature on CVE practice, and with an eye to boosting work in the field, what follows is a consideration of four challenges relating to CVE activity in the field.

### THE NATURE OF ASSESSMENT RESEARCH

Critiques of how CVE researchers (as well as program evaluators) gather information are a focus of debate. Two analysts, for example, found that “much of the literature on political violence...centers on game theory analysis and relies almost singularly on statistical regression analysis.” The authors then make the following bold assessment: “Few studies on P/CVE-relevant topics employ social network analysis or ethnographic methods — a stunning finding given the body of anecdotal evidence on the centrality of social bonds and cultural currency in conflicts shaped by identity politics.” They also assert that “the most widely cited English-language scholars

in the field tend to coalesce around theories on the role of grievances” and few “consistently apply new techniques or mixed quantitative and qualitative methods.”

In addition, the authors cite “a shallow empirical basis for many of the programmatic responses to violent extremism” and further find that “almost none of the top scholars hail from the countries and regions most impacted by the threat of violent extremism.” Their conclusion is fairly thunderous:

“Failing a more robust effort to develop a locally informed, empirically derived evidence base, and continual collection and systematic review of emerging research, it will be difficult to know with any degree of accuracy what works, and what does not, to prevent and counter extremism (Douglass & Rondeaux, 2017, 8–9).

An interesting and potentially significant additional finding concerns clustering. Atran et al. (2017, 354) cite evidence that “approximately three-fourths of those who join the Islamic State or al-Qaeda do so in groups. These groups often involve preexisting social networks and typically cluster in particular towns or neighborhoods,” and they argue that “fieldwork is needed to identify the specific conditions under which these processes play out.”



A CVE program design and evaluation guide points to the sorts of challenges (or deficiencies) highlighted by the analysts cited above. The authors find that CVE's "core field research methods generally include" three approaches:

- Key informant interviews that appear to include virtually everyone present except youth: "implementers of related programmes, government officials, NGO workers, private sector representatives, religious leaders, and so on."
- Focus group discussions, which propose to "enable key information to emerge through discussion among participants" (presumably those in CVE programs). This technique aims to "provide respondents with a sense of 'safety in numbers' while being asked about sensitive issues."<sup>24</sup>

Although focus groups can provide highly useful research results, the "safety in numbers" concept is potentially problematic. In some contexts, focus groups run the risk of promoting conformism, which "can derive from the pressure of social conventions, thus pushing participants to express more socially desirable and stereotypical answers" (Acocella, 2012, 1134).

The structured nature of focus group membership also can provide opportunities for powerful local leaders to influence them.<sup>25</sup> Such possible pressures may make it difficult for focus group members to discuss underlying realities. In addition, surveillance by state and VEO informants within such groups must be viewed as entirely possible. Focus groups, in general, contrast with peer groups, in which peers decide who will be interviewed together.

- Quantitative surveys, which "deliver statistically based information on a broad range of topics, such as perceptions of the legitimacy of violence..., perceptions of the state, local employment prospects, and so on" (Khalil & Zeuthen, 2016, 16). As with many focus groups, a potential challenge or constraint of this method is that it may not be based on developing intimacy or trust between evaluators/

researchers and respondents. One possible result is that respondents protect themselves by intentionally misleading researchers and concealing sensitive (and possibly dangerous) realities.

All of these methods point to distance between evaluators/researchers and the youth target group, as well as an absence of research based on trust between researchers and respondents. These issues are addressed in Recommendations for Research.

## THE CHALLENGE OF EVALUATION

An elemental dimension of CVE work is the difficulty of proving prevention. This formidable challenge has inspired some truly significant broadsides against CVE and PVE efforts. Some in the field take a precise, principled view of evaluating CVE action. Challgren et al., for example, bluntly state, "As CVE focuses on prevention, success is a 'non-event'" (2016, 11). "There's no means of measuring success in CVE programming," said one expert on violent extremism in Africa. Another stated that CVE programming "is hugely problematic to implement" because the objective is so daunting: "preventing violent extremism from happening." An expert with experience as a practitioner in the field asked, "The whole problem of prevention programming is: how do you know it worked?"

Perhaps unsurprisingly, some assessments of many CVE evaluations are devastating. One expert who reviewed CVE programming for a major Western donor reported, "All the reports painted this wonderful, rosy picture of positive impact from programs for CVE. It was a farce." In terms of quality, moreover, the evaluations were "crassly incompetent." "We're throwing known solutions at issues we don't understand," a conflict expert said on CVE efforts, and we thus "tend to look at the [CVE] problem through the lens of the solution that we already have." "It's hard to tell what's working," confessed one CVE expert with deep experience on the ground.

24 One definition for focus groups is "a 'non-standard' technique of information gathering, based on an apparently informal discussion among a group of people. The debate occurs in the presence of a moderator who leads the discussion according to the cognitive purposes outlined on the participants' characteristics, and an observer, who observes non-verbal behaviours and collects non-verbal information emerging from the interaction and integrates verbal information rising from the conversation. The discussion focuses on a topic selected by the researcher, whose aim is to analyse it in detail" (Acocella, 2012, 1126).

25 In the author's field research experience, this is not uncommon.

One set of authors argue the problem with CVE programming (and hence measuring its impact) is derived from a failure to focus on specific sets of people:

“ CVE programmes that fail to focus on individuals narrowly identified as ‘at risk’ of being attracted to violence will likely be ineffective or inefficient... because [violent extremism] typically only appeals to relatively limited subpopulations in those locations in which security conditions actually allow CVE interventions to occur...[As a result,] practitioners are confronted by a ‘needle in a haystack’ problem (Khalil & Zeuthen, 2016, 21).

In direct contrast, some CVE analysts and practitioners seek broad and dramatic reform — which is also difficult to achieve and evaluate. Among the recommendations for CVE action by a researcher of violent extremism are: “Programs should target inequality of education, income, and opportunity,” and, “Programs could aim to boost employment levels in Muslim-majority areas.” (Ali, 2016, 7). Evaluating connections between such broad kinds of programming and the specific goals of CVE promises to be difficult, perhaps nearly impossible. It is apparent that the evaluation challenge tied to CVE action has yet to be widely and successfully addressed.

## THE POPULARITY OF COUNTER-MESSAGING PROGRAMS

The use of social media messaging to deter or counteract the efforts of VEOs to reach youth has attracted considerable attention among many of the interviewed CVE experts. Before turning to their observations, and some of the commentary in published documents, a review of the rationale for this popular CVE approach is useful.

There is no question that some VEOs work hard to recruit youth to join their ranks via the Internet and social media. One analyst, for example, commented, “For young people today, there is little *new* about the new media environment. Rather, it is the *only* media environment with which they are familiar.” In this environment, “any activity in the ‘real’ world now has a virtual counterpart that may appear to be more appealing to a certain age cohort.” The inherent danger

in this state of affairs is that it “allows individuals who gravitate towards extremism to find themselves in highly cloistered, immersive environments, which effectively ‘cocoon’ audiences from alternate realities and interpretational frameworks” (Awan, 2015, 7; author italics).

Another analyst recommended “media and capacity building training to develop youth organization’s strategic communication skills or funding to develop their own messaging campaigns” (Morse, n.d., 3). One CVE expert asserted that CVE essentially is “a marketing and communication issue” and recommended that “we need to have young people create campaigns that dismantle violent ideologies and replace them with positive local narratives that are authentic to young people.” The vehicle for doing this work, the expert asserted, is social media.

Before turning to the critiques, two comments are necessary. First, many VEO groups have become experts at enticing young people online. One expert stated, “Jihadist recruiters are brilliant at supplying a narrative for profoundly alienated youth.” ISIS in particular surfaced as a VEO with remarkably refined youth recruiting skills that rely on, or start with, appeals via social media. It is thus entirely unsurprising that counter-narrative efforts have surfaced as a central CVE activity. Second, some governments reportedly prioritize messaging campaigns that counter the narratives of VEOs partly because the approach sidesteps discussion of state violence and poor governance as potential factors in youth recruitment into VEOs. This tactic effectively recreates the VEO-CVE rivalry as political football while avoiding engagement on how governments impact youth lives. This, too, is unsurprising.

A raft of critiques follows from the popular tactic of employing messaging, or counter-messaging, as a CVE activity. One set of analysts asserted that the US government focuses on “counter-narratives” that aim to provide an alternative to the “‘ideologies’ held to motivate terrorists.” While the analysts appear to mix two separate terms employed in CVE (counter-narrative and alternative narrative), the complaint they register about this approach is that it “treats ideas as disembodied from the human conditions in which they are embedded and given life as animators of social

groups” (Atran et al., 2017, 354).<sup>26</sup> “Counter-narratives are laughable,” one expert contended. “You have to engage with the needs, narratives, and networks of people.” Another used Yemen to argue for — at the very least — refinement of counter-messaging efforts, reporting that youth-led counter-narrative campaigns exist there on the Internet and via social media. However, the effort is constrained by a rather fundamental issue: Those who design the counter-narratives are urban university students who “are out of touch with rural people. There’s a real mismatch between those who live in cities and those who live in the desert.” The expert added that the main area of jihadist recruitment is in Yemen’s desert — and many youth living there lack access to social media.

It also should be noted that evaluating counter-messaging initiatives appears difficult to establish. Briggs and Feve (2013) highlight this challenge: “There is still limited understanding about what makes an effective counter-narrative campaign.”

## COMMUNITIES AND GOVERNMENTS

A recurrent theme in both the literature and interviews is the significance of communities as venues for CVE efforts. “There is no better, long-term, sustainable deterrent against terrorism and radicalization than educated, prosperous, safe, resilient, and empowered communities,” one analysis asserts (Couture, 2014, 50). A second states, “A key premise for research and policy-making in the CVE...context is that strengthening community resilience ‘in line with the goals of a democratic civil society’ can help individuals and communities avoid turning to extremist ideology and activity to satisfy a range of social and emotional needs” (Johns, Grossman, & McDonald, 2014, 57–58). A third asserts that “a more comprehensive and strategic approach that empowers local actors and focuses more attention on community-led interventions to address underlying drivers [of violent extremism] is required” (Rosand, 2016, 1). Another details a “Big

Society” vision that “expects citizens to come together to define a shared vision for their local communities, to work together to solve local problems and to be civil and mutually respectful of different people” (Bartlett & Birdwell, 2010, 25).

But employing community-based CVE approaches is complicated:

- Although experts and analysts often do not define what they mean by “community,” a common implied idea is that they are functional physical environments — and, by implication, that youth are recognized and accepted members of them. Indeed, the notion of “community” often is interpreted as a locality (such as a rural village). However, some local leaders are elites with a low tolerance for dissent. Such leaders may overlook or intentionally exclude orphans, undereducated adults, large numbers of women, adolescent girls, “failed” men, commercial sex workers, unmarried mothers, abusers of drugs or alcohol, members of ethnic pariah groups (such as Central Africa’s ethnic Twa or Europe’s Roma populations), and many other significant groups.<sup>27</sup>
- What youth consider their primary “community” may differ significantly from conventional concepts and instead constitute a particular peer group or online social network.
- A potentially complicating factor for community-based CVE work is that they may have formidable competitors. As one expert observed, “Community-based work is the Islamic violent extremist model.”
- Another challenge arises from the influence of governments over communities (or local areas). One expert, for example, envisioned the CVE challenge as a contest between governments and VEOs: “Extremists will exploit youth grievances and the perception of limited prospects,” but “without challenging VEOs with an alternative that shows some kind of better future, you lose the debate.” Making reference to

26 The following definitions reflect differences between counter-narratives and alternative narratives. As one set of analysts explain, “We define a counter-narrative as a system of stories that hang together to provide a coherent view of the world for the explicit purposes of combating violent extremist narratives, and eliciting legal and nonviolent activities in support of individuals, groups, or movements, which support that worldview. Counter narratives seek to directly address a violent narrative after it has been delivered to an intended audience, making them a reactive type of messaging.” On the other hand, “an alternative narrative is a system of stories that hang together to provide a coherent view of the world to promote and elicit legal and nonviolent activities in support of individuals, groups, or movements, which support that worldview. Unlike counter-narratives, alternative narratives are not explicitly intended to directly confront violent narratives, although they may have secondary outcomes, which do displace them” (Beutel et al., 2016, 38).

27 The notion of community, as applied in the field of international development, is assessed at length by Sommers (2015), which finds that “that which is considered bottom-up, community-based development work may be nothing of the sort. Instead, it may constitute homegrown, local-level methods for enforcing exclusion, inequality, and humiliation” (191).

CVE counter-messaging campaigns, the expert concluded, “You can’t just challenge VEOs with words: if the government refuses to provide a better future [for youth], then CVE is useless. I don’t see any CVE activities that have resulted in addressing youth grievances that substantially undermine extremist narratives.”

The behavior and proclivities of governments is a powerful and recurrent theme that emerged from interviews and the literature. It is infused in discussions about communities and violent extremism. One set of analysts, for example, stated:

“In areas deemed at ‘high risk’ of violent extremism — by the authorities or communities — it is likely that both overt and covert policing is taking place. This creates a tension and challenge for community members who may be engaging with overt police officers whilst also believing that they are the subject of covert observation and other operations (Spalek, Zahra McDonald, & El Awa, 2011, 6).

Along the same lines, a second set of analysts observed:

“What is most often missing from the analytical picture is the way community responses to failures of governance drive extremist grievance narratives. When mass violence occurs or some other disaster strikes, the first question asked in almost any context is where is the government? The rise in extremist violence over the last decade suggests, however, that we should also be asking how the government’s response [to extremist violence] impacts community perceptions of what is just and equitable (Aryaeinejad, Englund, Rondeaux, Sharma, & Stewart, 2017, 7).

The influence of governments on CVE work is absolutely inescapable.

# IX

## CENTRAL CONCLUSIONS

Issues related to youth, gender, governance, and the nature of communities inform the four central conclusions emerging from the analysis for this discussion paper. They are reviewed here with the aim of enhancing the breadth and effectiveness of work on CVE:

- *First, youth are not the consistent centerpiece of inquiry in literature on VEOs and CVE.* Research and action frequently are oriented around specific lenses for analysis and understanding, such as drivers of violent extremism, resiliencies that may counter violent extremist activity, and factors that push young people toward — or pull them away from — VEOs.

However, a deeper understanding of what it's like to be a youth in areas vulnerable to VEO activity largely is missing. The following questions should be addressed when undertaking research and analysis of violent extremism:

- + What, precisely, excludes or marginalizes a young person in these locations?
- + Who is concerned about youth, and whom do youth revere?
- + What does “community” mean to youth, and which communities do they belong to?
- + What is their view of and engagement with local leaders, police officers, and government officials?
- + Are the state or other forces directing violence and threat their way?

- + How does Islam (or other religious beliefs) figure in their life and ideas?
- + What are their life prospects?
- + How do class and gender issues sculpt their views and future plans?
- + What rationales do youth employ to resist engagement in violence and extremism?

Finally, perhaps the most important question of all is: *How do youth gain social acceptance as adults — and what happens if they fail?*

- *Second, the current approach to gender requires significant strengthening.* While gender is a dynamic central force in youth lives and VEO recruitment strategies, gender issues often are not central to CVE and research on violent extremism. The gender and CVE literature mixes significant advancement with perplexing oversight. Efforts to detail the diverse and important roles of female youth and women for VEOs are exceptionally important: research for this paper strongly suggests they perform crucial tasks in VEOs. The rising level of research on this issue is encouraging and vital.

At the same time, the study of male youth and masculinity is alarmingly inadequate given that male youth dominate the ranks of VEOs and exploiting masculine vulnerabilities is a VEO specialty. Indeed, given the centrality of shame, humiliation, and related concerns for VEO recruiters, the general underemphasis on masculinity issues in



research on violent extremists is startling. *Arguably the most important gender issue for this discussion — emasculation — may be the most overlooked.*

Not one CVE expert interviewed and virtually no documents reviewed for this discussion paper employed the term “female youth.”<sup>28</sup> Implicitly, a “youth” routinely was equated with a male youth, while their counterparts usually were labeled “young women.” This underscores the pronounced lack of engagement with adulthood issues for female (and male) youth. The fallout from threatened or failed adulthood can exacerbate exclusion and alienation for female and male youth while laying the groundwork for pronounced tensions between older elite leaders and struggling young people. This scenario is both common and frequently overlooked or undervalued by governments and international actors. It also unintentionally cultivates fertile recruitment ground for VEOs.

- *Third, governments typically react to the presence of large youth populations by repressing them.* Research points to proactive state repression unintentionally fueling the cause of VEOs. State repression is counterproductive in the extreme because it separates youth from governments and undercuts the viability of alternatives to joining a VEO. Governments set the tone for whether, and how, to effectively counter violent extremist groups. Quite often, that tone is unhelpful, if not obstructive.
- *Fourth, communities matter — but not always in the ways that the CVE field highlights.* To begin with, VEOs have an emphatic presence in some communities. In many others, competition between

state and non-state VEO rivals reportedly is present (with surveillance likely among the ways each side keeps tabs and exerts influence). Another possible dimension is the impact of “hard power” counterterrorism operations in the locality. Such community environments are likely to be tense and intimate.

Complicating matters even further is the possibility that some youth may form their own social communities separate from formal communities since, quite often, local power brokers actively marginalize them. A common dimension of “community” activism toward youth, in fact, is the widespread presence of culturally determined adulthood requirements that most youth struggle, and may fail, to fulfill. The result is a lot of young people viewing their social situation as embarrassing, quite possibly humiliating, and perhaps alienating.

Regardless of how communities ultimately are defined, they are dynamic institutions, networks, or locations where membership is not necessarily voluntary and may feature high degrees of condemnation, exclusion, and friction. Accordingly, the observed tendency in much local-level development, CVE, and PVE work to “work through the community” is an imprecise method for accessing young people living on its margins. It is important to remember that the critical concept of youth having a “voice” may be viewed as a new and even radical idea by elite power brokers. The community-derived status quo likely does not work well for many youth. While it is indeed possible for local communities to be inclusive, it is unwise to presume it.

28 The identified exceptions were Shauri (2018) and Hudson and Matfess (2017).

# X

## RECOMMENDATIONS

A central purpose of this discussion paper is to draw from existing research on youth in fields related to CVE: violence, conflict, and development. The following set of recommendations emerges from this analysis, together with analysis of issues and contexts directly related to violent extremism and CVE.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY

- 1 *Make the CVE-youth connection emphatic.* To a significant degree, CVE is a field of youth study and practice: the central concern of CVE efforts is to keep young people from expanding the ranks of violent extremist groups.

Accordingly, making the youth-CVE connection emphatic is recommended because youth are, by far, the primary target group for recruitment into non-state violent extremist groups. Explicit emphasis promises to sharpen CVE strategy and analysis, as well as expand the methods and expectations of research on violent extremism. Youth must be understood to uncover and engage potential youth “needles in a haystack” (suggestions for enhancing the research approach are provided in the following subsection). The central aim should be to build and apply knowledge of what it is like to be a female or male youth in areas where violent extremists are active or that are vulnerable

to violent extremist activity. Understanding why most youth are peaceful should be a component of inquiry. It is essential to remember that even if CVE (or PVE) did not exist, most female and male youth would not become violent extremists.

The point is to expand the youth knowledge base significantly and to maintain approaches to youth that emphasize partnership, with a focus on the constructive contributions of youth to CVE and peacebuilding. Crucially, such an approach further promises to enhance understandings of why most youth do not join violent extremist groups.<sup>29</sup>

- 2 *Directly link ideas of “youth” and “gender.”* Gender issues are core concerns for most youth. “Gender” should apply to all youth, and “youth” should relate to both female and male youth. Employing the terms “male youth” and “female youth” (as opposed to “young men” or “young women”) is recommended for situations in which achieving socially recognized adulthood is delayed or beyond the reach of most youth. Since the prospect of marriage and socially accepted adulthood can be a prime reason for entering a VEO, it is inaccurate and misleading to call youth either “young men” or “young women” when they have yet to gain recognition as men and women.

Researchers of violent extremism, together with practitioners and supporters of CVE, should prioritize youth and gender issues for the following

<sup>29</sup> The positive potential of youth in the United Nations General Assembly’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism and United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 underscores the need to position youth at the center of CVE and to cultivate partnerships with them.

reason: their VEO adversaries do. Emasculation, humiliation, exclusion, and alienation, as they connect to female and male youth lives and their relationships with adults (powerful elites in particular), should be examined much more deeply. Researchers and practitioners also should probe the following question: *How do youth gain social acceptance as adults — and what happens if they fail?*

Expertise on youth and gender issues, in short, is essential for effective and sustainable CVE work. To be effective, it is important to remember that the study of gender and violent extremism cannot be a zero-sum game. Research on women and female youth is crucial. However, so is the study of men and male youth, in addition to how masculine and feminine norms and expectations influence the lives of young people and the actions of VEOs.

**3** *Highlight the prominence of class divisions in policy and program work.* Research on violent extremism and in support of CVE work should investigate two sets of class divisions.

- + The first set is divisions within youth populations. Elite and non-elite youth often are at odds with each other. Understanding tensions and conflicts between sub-groups of youth helps to define and explain local youth terrains. In addition, there may be specific local reasons why certain elite or non-elite youth are attracted to or repelled by VEOs. Research that includes an examination of class-based concerns can help uncover this.
- + The second set of class divisions concerns widely recognized, mainstream, and powerful leaders in local contexts. In reality, such “leaders” may have narrow or negative influence over youth. For example, they may privilege youth they deem acceptable and support the status quo they dominate. More significantly, they may actively marginalize and repress certain kinds of youth — including those most vulnerable to entering a VEO. CVE actors should apply research analysis of these two sets of class divisions to inform their policy and program work.

**4** *Adapt community-based ideas and approaches to underlying realities.* Praise for communities and community resilience is a tendency in much of the CVE literature and thinking. However, while some communities are reasonably functional, inclusive, and worthy of acclaim, others are emphatically dysfunctional. The latter may feature leaders who drive division and conflict by excluding and humiliating certain groups. Research-based knowledge of youth lives and local context should inform notions of community, inclusion, and exclusion. This knowledge then should be used to engage with youth, leaders, and others in particular localities — particularly young people who are alienated and have been marginalized by power brokers.

It also is important to gauge the ways in which a particular community — a rural village, an urban neighborhood, a particular cohort of youth, a social media grouping, and so on — interacts with VEOs. A potentially prominent means is surveillance: when employed by governments and/or VEOs, it probably will have a significant influence over community dynamics. Indeed, it probably is wise to assume that such surveillance exists (until it can be established that it does not).

**5** *Make addressing state violence and corruption a high CVE priority.* Analysis for this paper identified locally driven approaches to CVE challenges as a widespread priority. While this is necessary, it is not sufficient. Important local efforts should be coupled with advocacy with governments (and relevant regional organizations). Determined and steadfast advocacy with governments centered on partnership with youth and authentic, meaningful reform of policies and practices that repress and exclude youth almost certainly is a central component of successful CVE work virtually everywhere.

This advocacy (and program) process starts with sound research that targets local areas vulnerable to youth recruitment by VEOs (see the following subsection on recommendations for research). Such research promises to reveal the predominant governance and other forces that constrain and frustrate youth, limit VEO recruitment efforts — and help drive small handfuls of youth toward VEOs. Power brokers, slim or unsavory future prospects

for youth, economic systems skewed for insiders, the exploitation of those working in informal economic markets or living in informal housing, gross corruption and inequality, the repression of peaceful dissent and the promotion of state force, and leaders with questionable or disturbing tendencies all may factor into a social, political, and cultural environment that constrains young people.

Governments that address state violence, repression, and corruption challenges can reduce prospects for violent extremism and enhance stability — both of which are natural ambitions for most governments. Actors and institutions engaged in CVE can employ United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 and the United Nations General Assembly’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism as advocacy tools. Both call for governments to engage with youth as partners and assets for boosting security.

Partnerships that link governments and elite leaders to youth may be nontraditional and, at first, uncomfortable, particularly for power brokers and security forces personnel. However, they also are crucial to future CVE and peacebuilding success. Messaging to counter violent extremism is not a substitute for meaningful government reform.

- 6 *Divert explicit CVE work away from areas where counterterrorism action is planned or underway.* The application of CVE work in the same context as counterterrorism almost certainly is counterproductive and possibly dangerous for CVE practitioners and those with whom they engage.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH

- 1 *Promote and implement mixed-methods research.* Balancing the assets of quantitative research with complementary qualitative efforts promises to provide a significantly broader and deeper understanding of regional, national, and local dynamics of violent extremism and the lives of youth.

- 2 *Employ trust-based, qualitative research methods to complement existing methods.* Ethical, effective research must account for the following question: *Why should anyone tell researchers the truth?* The possibility that surveillance by state and/or non-state actors may be present in research environments underscores the challenge this question represents. The suggested approach features trust-based, qualitative methods with youth and those who may influence them. In rural, peri-urban, and urban areas, it has the potential to provide new and important information on violent extremism and what factors are affecting and informing youth.

Trust-based, qualitative methods feature:

- + *A preference for peer groups.* Peer groups, in contrast to many kinds of focus groups, are self-selecting. A female or male youth can choose who will be interviewed together and where to meet. While no method is foolproof, in the author’s experience, the chance is high of many focus groups generating pre-packaged narratives versus peer groups providing more authentic information.
- + *Extended stays in one locality and snowball sampling.* This further promotes the prospect of gaining reliable, corroborating information.
- + *Questionnaires that feature simple, declarative language and begin with questions designed to empower those interviewed.*
- + *Investigation into specific forces (and personalities) that exclude and marginalize youth.* The approach also promises to shed light on factors that attract some youth toward VEOs and drive most youth to resist or ignore their designs on them.<sup>30</sup>

These methods promise to yield useful comparative data from field research that investigates the phenomenon known as “clustering.” Despite general similarities across rural villages or urban neighborhoods in one area, “clustering” takes place when youth are found to leave for VEOs in one village or neighborhood — but not from those

30 One example of this methodological approach is discussed in the “Methodological Details” section (p. 52–67) of *Stuck: Rwandan Youth and the Struggle for Adulthood* (Sommers, 2012). The methods originally were developed with Peter Uvin, with whom Dr. Sommers wrote the United States Institute of Peace special report *Youth in Rwanda and Burundi: Contrasting Visions* (2011).



nearby. Atran et al. (2017) cite evidence suggesting this phenomenon in areas where VEOs are influential is both significant and little understood.<sup>31</sup>

- 3 *Use trust-based, qualitative methodologies for assessment research that informs policy advocacy and customizes program work.* Assessment research featuring the proposed methodological approach should be conducted in areas where programming is being considered and where advocacy on policy and practice are needed. The findings should inform the advocacy that international actors employ with government counterparts, as well as guide program design.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

- 1 *Tackle specific local challenges.* Linking local research approaches to local CVE activities has been endorsed by many in the field. Indeed, what CVE does should emerge from what specific local contexts require. In fashioning their customized responses, program personnel should explore partnering with youth to design initiatives. This may not always be possible, if local leaders aggressively resist positive engagement with youth, or even allow youth new profiles and opportunities to contribute or lead. Even in such cases, it may be possible, over time, to encourage leaders to view young people differently.

Accordingly, when opportunities exist, creative approaches should be encouraged. For example, what if youth designed and led trainings of local police on new techniques for police-youth engagement? Alternatively, what if youth and elders worked to adjust unreachable adulthood requirements? Considering creative, youth-guided approaches to local programming is strongly advised. Emphasizing partnership with youth, recognizing the positive contributions of youth to CVE and peacebuilding, and promoting peaceful masculinities are all recommended. Never overlook the gender-specific concerns, priorities, and vulnerabilities of female and male youth.

- 2 *Promote a learning environment for CVE programs.* Most youth will never participate in a youth program: their populations are far too large, differentiated, and dispersed. Since the numbers of excluded youth also can be huge, it is crucial programs strive not to make things worse by unintentionally exacerbating youth exclusion and alienation.

Learning from experience in international development is instructive. Research has revealed how strong pressure on donor and implementing agencies to demonstrate success has led to unfortunate results, such as biased and weak evaluations and the inadvertent promotion of inequality (by quietly inserting elite youth into programs) (Sommers, 2015).

Efforts should be made to avoid these tendencies and promote learning environments for CVE initiatives. Including marginalized youth, whom one CVE expert called “the unreachable,” is difficult and, apparently, undertaken infrequently. However, this may be precisely the sort of young people who should be in CVE programs. Relying on powerful local leaders to identify such profoundly alienated people for programs is likely to backfire since such leaders may be a direct cause of their marginalization.

Effective CVE work is hard to do and even harder to prove. Practitioners probably could draw an instructive lesson from counterterrorism practitioners. While counterterrorism work focuses on the particular tactics and strategies of VEO adversaries, the approach in CVE work often appears to be more general, focusing broadly on violent extremism instead of specific VEOs in their locality. This may minimize the potential for positive impact. Fortunately, when compared to the development field, the CVE field appears to be more open to learning from well-intentioned missteps. Program implementers should be allowed to falter (at first) in efforts to include alienated, “unreachable” youth in their programs. Just gaining their trust can be difficult. Authentic measures for assessing and

31 Details of one approach to trust-based, qualitative research — including suggested techniques for investigating the clustering phenomenon — can be found in the author’s forthcoming book, *Trust-Based, Qualitative Field Methods: A Manual for Researchers of Violent Extremism* (Djibouti: Intergovernmental Authority on Development).



adjusting efforts thus are required (as is patience from donor agencies). The following specific steps are recommended:

*Access to a program may matter even more than content.* If insider youth fill a program even when quality research reveals that youth most likely to enter a VEO are alienated outsiders, then a successful program runs the risk of further alienating young people. Unintentionally, the favoritism and nepotism that such a program would communicate could ease the work of VEO recruiters.

*Programs should select their staff with considerable care.* Hiring elite insiders to work with alienated outsiders is an uneasy fit and should be avoided. Regardless of how impressive a résumé may be, it may be difficult for a person from a privileged background to become aware of and then unlearn the social and cultural cues they have absorbed over time. Skill in reaching non-elites and knowledge of the power of alienation and gender norms promise to be crucial assets for all program officials.

*Avoid generic “plug-and-play” programming.*<sup>32</sup> Customizing programs to specific local contexts (as noted above) is strongly recommended. To be effective, program officials probably first need to learn about the sources of youth alienation, emasculation, frustration, and humiliation. Helping young people escape social, cultural, economic, and political entrapment, and find purpose and authentic self-empowerment, begins with understanding their context. Quality field research will initiate a learning curve.

*Never “sensitize” or “mobilize.”* These all-too-common development concerns communicate condescension and coercion, not listening and understanding. Mobilizing and/or sensitizing people is precisely the opposite of what effective CVE or PVE programs should convey.

*Program monitoring and evaluation work must examine the impact of programs on youth who could not access them.* This orientation promises to reveal whether unintended negative effects have arisen for non-participant youth, and if so, how the program can address them. Strong emphasis also should be given to program outcomes in addition to outputs, since outcomes generally provide more significant indications of program impact. Finally, program participants should not be called “beneficiaries” until benefit is proven, as the term is inherently biased and inappropriate for evaluative work.

- 3 *Pay program implementers to advocate with government counterparts.* On-the-ground CVE and PVE practitioners should be empowered to draw from their networks and knowledge of local context to help craft and apply sustained advocacy efforts with government counterparts. Donors and their implementing partners should collaborate to devise broadly coordinated strategies to advocate with those authorities most likely to take their advocacy efforts on board. Reversing the self-destructive policies and practices of states with regard to youth (such as state corruption and repression) and making it easier for governments to partner with young citizens are urgent needs. At the same time, it may be difficult for CVE and PVE practitioners to enact effective, engaged advocacy efforts without a budget line. This issue should be addressed.

<sup>32</sup> While this worthy advice addresses development contexts, it is also entirely relevant to PVE and CVE: “Local ownership is too often a victim of bureaucratic and administrative constraints, or the political push for ‘big numbers’ and quick results. Off-the-shelf, plug-and-play interventions, driven by the same assumptions, regardless of context, and designed to produce the same outputs are, unfortunately, the norm” (Hummer, 2015, 3).

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marc Sommers began conducting research with young people nearly three decades ago. Since that time, he has provided strategic advice and carried out research, assessment, and evaluation work for donor and United Nations agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and policy institutes in 22 war-affected countries (16 in Africa). His field experience in and expertise on Central and East Africa, the Mano River region of West Africa, South Sudan, and Kosovo are extensive.

Much of Dr. Sommers' research has focused on the lives, perspectives, and priorities of war-affected youth, adolescents, and children. His work also has addressed many other issues, including gender, countering violent extremism (CVE), governance, informal economies, exclusion and inclusion, education, peacebuilding, conflict, forced migration, urbanization, and development. He is a member of the United Nations Advisory Group of Experts for the Progress Study on Youth, Peace, and Security.

Dr. Sommers first engaged on youth and CVE issues as a senior conflict adviser for the Bureau for Conflict and Stabilization Operations at the US Department of State in Washington, DC (2015–2017). He also provided conflict analysis and peacebuilding advice on Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Mozambique, South Sudan, and atrocities

prevention. He subsequently worked as a senior research adviser for the Intergovernmental Authority on Development Center of Excellence in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (2017–2018). He was seconded to work there by the Bureau for Conflict and Stabilization Operations.

Dr. Sommers' eighth book, *The outcast majority: War, development, and youth in Africa*, received the 2017 Jackie Kirk Award and an honorable mention for the 2016 Senior Book Prize. He also received an honorable mention for the 2013 Bethwell A. Ogot Book Prize for *Stuck: Rwandan youth and the struggle for adulthood*, as well as the 2003 Margaret Mead Award for *Fear in Bongoland: Burundi refugees in urban Tanzania*. His forthcoming book is entitled *Trust-based, qualitative field methods: A manual for researchers of violent extremism* (Djibouti: Intergovernmental Authority on Development).

Dr. Sommers taught for many years at The Fletcher School at Tufts University and was both a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and a Jennings Randolph Senior Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace. Based in the Washington, DC, area, he is affiliated with the African Studies Center at Boston University. He received his Ph.D. in anthropology from Boston University in 1994.



