



DEMOCRACY & GOVERNANCE: CENTRAL ASIA SUPPORT FOR STABLE SOCIETIES (CASSS)

VIOLENT EXTREMISM RISK FRAMEWORK

The USAID Central Asia Support for Stable Societies (CASSS) project's research findings show that extremism risk arises from the complex interaction between three distinct but overlapping processes: the development of individual and community vulnerabilities, social selection, and exposure to social settings supportive of extremism.

CASSS RISK FRAMEWORK

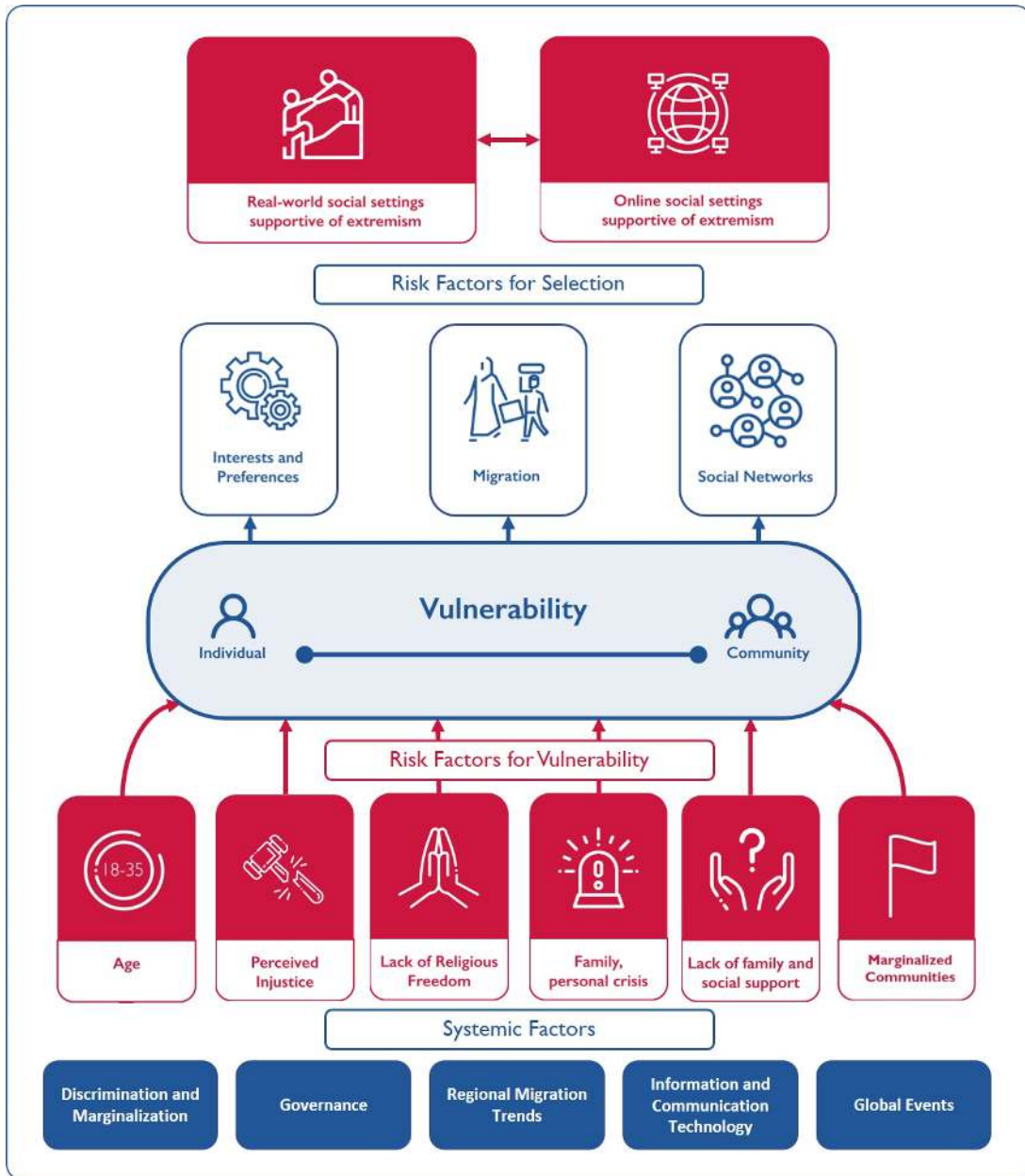
CASSS research identified a variety of risk factors for radicalization and mobilization to violent extremism. These factors operate in different ways to increase overall risk for violent extremism. Some risk factors contribute to individual and community vulnerability to violent extremism, while others address the important factor of exposure to social settings supportive of extremism. Vulnerability alone does not lead to radicalization or mobilization. It is only through exposure to social settings supportive of extremism that individuals make decisions that lead to their radicalization and mobilization. This risk framework organizes risks into three broad categories and models how their complex interaction leads to the emergence of overall extremism risk.

RISK FACTORS FOR VULNERABILITY

CASSS research identified six risk factors that increase individual and community vulnerability to violent extremism. Individuals who are **between the ages of 18 and 35** and are **members of marginalized communities** are at significantly higher risk for mobilization to violent extremism. **Perceptions of injustice** and a **lack of religious freedom** were shown to increase individual vulnerability to mobilization. The **experience of a personal or family crisis** and **weak family and social support networks** were shown to increase vulnerability to violent extremism for individuals and communities. These six factors are characterized by strong mutual interactions. For example, CASSS research showed that individuals between the ages of 18 and 35 are much more likely to report perceptions of injustice and weak family and social support networks, and members of marginalized communities are much

more likely to report lower levels of religious freedom, weak family and social support networks, and perceptions of injustice.

FIGURE I: CASS VIOLENT EXTREMISM RISK FRAMEWORK



RISK FACTORS FOR EXPOSURE

Absent exposure to social settings supportive of extremism, or the ideas and values of extremist social networks, vulnerability does not lead to mobilization to violent extremism. Individual decisions regarding mobilization to violent extremism are made in **social settings that provide moral and intellectual support for extremism**. These settings exist both in the **real world and online**. It is increasingly

difficult to disaggregate the impacts of exposure to real-world and online social settings as, thanks to social media, these now happen concurrently.

RISK FACTORS FOR SELECTION

The key process that links vulnerability to exposure is selection. Real world social settings supportive of extremism are not equally distributed geographically. Neither are online social settings supportive of extremism equally distributed on the internet, with some individuals more likely to be exposed to these settings for a variety of reasons. Selection is the collection of social processes by which individuals with varying degrees of vulnerability are exposed to social settings supportive of extremism.

CASSS research showed that **migration** is a key selection factor as it increases the likelihood an individual will be exposed to social settings supportive of extremism. **Social and family networks** are also an important selection factor. These networks are the primary avenue through which individuals are introduced to social settings supportive of extremism. Finally, personal **interests and preferences** – an interest in learning about religion online, or involvement in criminal networks – select some individuals for higher risk of exposure to social settings supportive of extremism.

SYSTEMIC FACTORS

Systemic factors are social, political, economic and environmental factors that structure the environment in which risks and vulnerabilities develop, and importantly how risks are distributed evenly or not across a population. Systemic factors are often described as the “causes of causes,” that is, their effects are mediated by more immediate causes that lie closer to the problem at hand, in this case risk factors to increase vulnerability, selection and exposure. Systemic factors are generally outside the realm of factors that can be addressed by community-based PVE programming, and as such CASSS research focused on individual and community factors, not systemic factors. Discussion of prominent theories of systemic factors and their relationship to extremism can be found in the CASSS research design.

COMPLEXITY AND EXTREMISM RISK

Overall extremism risk arises through the complex interaction of vulnerabilities, selection, and exposure. These processes do not occur in a linear fashion but should be understood as occurring at the same time in parallel. At any one time, risk factors are increasing individual and community vulnerabilities, while selection factors are selecting individuals with varying degrees of vulnerability for exposure to social settings conducive to extremism. The presence or absence of selection and exposure risk factors for specific individuals explains why some low vulnerability individuals may mobilize to violent extremism, while many high vulnerability individuals never mobilize at all.