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# Community Action Strategy

## **Countering Violent Extremism In Kenya**

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OVERVIEW

A product of an extensive USAID-funded study into violent extremist (VE) and counter violent extremism (CVE) communications networks in several Kenyan counties (Kwale, Mombasa, and Nyeri), this guide is targeted at all involved in the field of CVE, offering an overview of considerations and good practice. Although the focus is on how to communicate with various stakeholders, it is not specific to counter-messaging interventions nor only addresses work with 'at risk' youth. Instead, it offers advice on how to communicate with entire communities, including local support networks that shape how violent extremism is perceived and set the social and cultural norms within which all actors, including youths, operate.



## Preliminary Considerations and Approaches

- Assess local perceptions and interpretations of violent extremism (and CVE). Awareness raising can help strengthen community comprehension and improve public buy-in to interventions, but you will need to frame activities in ways recipient populations understand and ensure their concerns are reflected in proposed solutions.
- Interrogate programmatic assumptions from the outset, ensuring stakeholders do not rely on unsubstantiated or deleterious ideas e.g., violent extremism is a 'Muslim-problem' or a 'foreign import'.
  - This also applies to targeting: do not assume an individual is sympathetic to VE ideas just because they share VE messages.
- Conduct a detailed stakeholder analysis within the community before you begin. Perceptions of the same institutions, organizations, and actors vary from neighborhood to neighborhood.
  - E.g., the credibility, influence and capacity of civil society organizations may vary depending on their local networks and experience.
- Consider trade-offs between access, trust, credibility, and the potential for antagonism when working with Government.
  - The National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC) and relevant County Commissioner must be aware of your activities and support your approach.
  - Some elements of society are likely to dismiss your activities if seen to be associated too closely with the Government (county or national).
  - Formality does not necessarily mean efficacy. For example, in various counties barazas should be restructured, working with chiefs to ensure they are not intelligence collection exercises but safe spaces for all segments of society to (voluntarily) share their ideas and grievances.

## Scope and Implementation

- Outreach and communication should reflect societal dynamics, context, and gender sensitivities, recognizing how personal connections, socialization, identity-formation and meaning-seeking all inform and influence how information is shared and interpreted.
  - Where possible, involve interlocutors with access to peer-to-peer network as individuals often share information amongst tight-knit groups of friends and family, using messaging applications or watching/discussing extremist content together in maskanis or other social settings.
- Identify emotive or contemporary topics for discussion as they offer useful entry points/hooks for engaging audiences and facilitate bridges for a wider dialogue around grievances and frustrations.
  - Practitioners should not shy away from controversial subjects such as police brutality – they should be handled sensitively but conversations must reflect the genuine sentiments, grievances, and aspirations of participants. This includes talking through appropriate responses to police misconduct and the perceived marginalization of Muslims.
  - Do not criticize those you are trying to support. People are often suspicious when talking or engaging around sensitive subjects - a lack of empathy will quickly push would-be participants away. Practitioners should adopt a shame-sensitive approach to communications - participants may be ashamed to admit involvement in sharing extremist messages.
- Ensure that the message is straightforward and cannot be misinterpreted.
  - Consider partnerships with faith-based organizations and religious actors, helping develop their capacity to communicate (e.g., informally and dynamically), contextualize scripture, and engage proactively with local audiences.
    - \* However, do not assume violent extremism is necessarily a religious issue or exclusively driven by terrorist propaganda: radicalization and/or recruitment are the product of many factors.
    - \* Remember religious actors (and all other stakeholders) operate in a wider social ecosystem – be aware of societal, political, and ideological divisions in their local context as this could diminish their reach and impact across various sub-groups. Navigating these dynamics and ensuring appropriate representation takes continual engagement.
- Communication is about more than just messaging. Relationships and networks must be built to amplify meaning. When messages are shared as part of activities offering real solutions, they will have a higher likelihood of resonating with the target audience.
  - Build trust with recipient communities. This partially necessitates individual engagement and embedding yourself in local social networks, creating friendships and personal connections.
    - \* It is also determined by your reputation and ability to deliver tangible results. Linking CVE projects to broader development and economic initiatives (where relevant/ feasible/ appropriate) can improve your ability to (sustainably) address community grievances.

- Peacebuilding and development actors need to ensure CVE considerations are integrated into wider efforts to resolve relative deprivation, conflict and violence. These should be mutually reinforcing and complementary processes. Such programmes should also allow a proportion of target beneficiaries to come from at risk groups.
- Manage expectations: balance the need for immediate reward (compensation for involvement in activities) with transparency over the long- term objectives of a program. Empty promises and frustrated aspirations will lead to a loss of trust.

## Cross-Cutting Focus Areas

- Build private-public partnerships: Integrate local businesses and commercial stakeholders into CEF networks, and the design and delivery of CVE activities, as they can increase community engagement and the sustainability of project outcomes.
  - Employment schemes: Connect private entities to unemployed civilians with appropriate qualifications. Lack of opportunities, regardless of education, remains a major grievance.
- Role models and mentorship: Identify successful actors who can serve as role models for young people. Additionally, link wider mentorship schemes with efforts to increase employability, providing vocational and business management training and opportunities to develop transferable skills.
- Consider civic engagement (not just education) within CVE programming.
  - Set up mentorship systems or have officers available to explain (and support) how to access public services and interact with government officials.
    - \* Once you have the above, you can also promote the benefits of voting in elections, increase transparency around the mandates of various Government positions, and offer advice on identifying misinformation / 'fake news'.
    - \* Improve public understanding of the justice system, for instance explaining the mechanisms of bail to contextualize and legitimize the apparent 'release' of suspects (it is a conditional arrangement that is part of due process rather than an example of corruption and bribery).
  - Those circulating VE messages should be sensitized about the potential implications of their messaging practices, both in terms of the law and their contribution to normalizing these ideas.
- Improve communication and relations between Kenyan society and law enforcement: Facilitate dialogue sessions, meals, and sports- tournaments with communities (especially youths) to build awareness, empathy, and mutual trust. Ideally, officers should not be armed or in uniform when taking part in these activities.
  - Encourage the involvement of lower ranking/frontline security personnel (including the ATPU if possible) alongside senior officials (e.g, the County Commissioner or OCS).
  - Continue to increase and diversify the police cohorts participating in these sessions so community linkages with local departments are not contingent on lone individuals who may later be transferred. This can help develop institutional memory, which is key to durable normative change.

- Sustain programming – this is a long-term process. Look for short-term wins/gains to keep beneficiaries engaged but recognize and be transparent about the time needed for incremental change. Do not over-promise or create unrealistic expectations.
- This goes beyond CVE programming – identify and connect (where possible) your efforts to wider security sector reform (SSR) initiatives such as those working to strengthen accountability measures, oversight, and conduct in security provision.



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For a detailed copy of the findings of the USAID-funded study, please contact:

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