

Development and countering violent extremism

How can the post-2015 development agenda work in tandem with another pressing global problem, that of dealing with violent extremism? What can the UN do to ensure that actors working on development and security can mutually benefit from each other's work?

By **Naureen Chowdhury Fink**, Head of Research and Analysis, and **Rafia Bhulai**, Programs Officer, Global Center on Cooperative Security

Over the past decade, counterterrorism policymakers and practitioners have increasingly focused on developing a broader strategic approach that stresses prevention and addresses the enabling environment for terrorism and violent extremism.

It should be noted that 'violent extremism' denotes the support for or perpetration of acts of violence with the purpose of advancing a socio-political agenda. Such acts may not be confined to what are defined as acts of terrorism in UN conventions and protocols, but may include criminal, political and other forms of violence. Hence, all terrorism may be considered violent extremism but the latter is a broader category.

This is reflected in the emergence of an area of practice known as 'countering violent extremism' (CVE). While CVE emerged from the counterterrorism community and addresses the threat of violent extremism, it can be an important tool for both conflict prevention and development based on the premise that violence impedes sustainable development and threatens human rights.

A number of multilateral, national and regional prevention-focused initiatives have emerged under the rubric of CVE, including those concentrating on strategic communications, media, gender,

education and community policing, for example. While the terminology has come to represent prevention writ large, policymakers and practitioners vary on the breadth of focus.

Some argue for more tailored 'CVE-specific' interventions, while others focus further upstream on what the UN calls "conditions conducive" to the spread of terrorism, and promote 'CVE-relevant' programmes that may resemble traditional development, peacebuilding or conflict-prevention activities that have CVE as a by-product. These latter initiatives are also referenced as 'Preventing Violent Extremism' (PVE) as reflected in the UN Secretary-General's recent Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism.

Push and pull factors

Against this backdrop, there is increasing focus on understanding the relationship between the drivers of violent extremism – the structural 'push' factors and the proximate incentives or 'pull' factors – and on deepening knowledge of both the source of the problem and the responses required.

Current research suggests that there is no universal indicator or determinant of support for or participation in violent extremism; it is a non-linear process that results from a combination of different factors that shape an individual's trajectory.

While a direct causal relationship has not been determined, there are a number of recognised conditions conducive to – or factors that create – an enabling environment for violent extremist groups to

drum up support and recruits. As outlined by the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, adopted by the General Assembly in 2006, these include: prolonged unresolved conflicts; dehumanisation of victims of terrorism; lack of the rule of law and violations of human rights; ethnic, national and religious discrimination; political exclusion; socio-economic marginalisation; and lack of good governance.

The potential overlap between CVE and development assistance is especially evident when looking beyond the traditional interpretation of national security to human security, which includes environmental, economic, health and crime-related threats. The World Bank's 2011 *World Development Report* argued that the developmental consequences and human costs of violence are severe and that violence has been the main constraint to meeting the Millennium Development Goals.

It asserted that restoring confidence and transforming the institutions that provide citizen security, justice and employment are key to breaking cycles of insecurity and realising economic development and stability. The experiences of countries like Mali, Libya, Nigeria, Somalia and Yemen underscore the vulnerability of countries experiencing prolonged instability and help illustrate the findings that incidents of terrorism are most common within the context of an already-existing conflict.

In fact, according to the World Bank, out of 23 countries identified as experiencing ongoing conflict, 17 also suffer from the highest levels of terrorism. This is not to say



© Getty Images/Richard Bord

◀ A mass unity rally following the terrorist attacks in Paris, France in January 2015. The attacks were a stark reminder that violent extremism is not just a developing-world problem and that all societies need to address the root causes of radicalisation

security (although ‘vulnerable’ or ‘at risk’ does not imply an assumption of support for or participation in violent extremism). Moreover, the impact on children and their vulnerability to recruitment or coercion by extremist groups remains a critical concern.

Individual circumstances

Poverty appears to play an important role in creating a hospitable environment for extremist groups to operate and recruit. The Institute for Economics and Peace’s 2015 Global Terrorism Index found that since 2000, only seven per cent of all terrorism incidents have occurred in countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Development and Co-operation, accounting for just five per cent of all terrorism-related fatalities.

According to the report, in 2014, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria and Syria alone were home to 78 per cent of the lives lost to terrorist attacks. While poverty cannot be proven to have a direct causal relationship to terrorism, it is clear the impact of extremist violence has been borne most heavily by the citizens of poor(er) countries. This is not to say that recruitment and radicalisation to violent extremism do not happen in richer countries; they certainly do, as demonstrated by the fact that most of the foreign fighters currently in Syria and Iraq do not come from the poorest countries.

However, the circumstances of individuals play a big role in determining whether they are driven towards extremism by push factors or attracted by pull factors. Each country, community and individual has unique dynamics that defy generalisations. The actions of states are also critical given that research suggests the role of the state and its law enforcement and governance institutions are critical in promoting narratives of injustice and generating grievances that can contribute to violent radicalisation.²

that all conflict breeds terrorism, but where it does, terrorist incidents exacerbate already heavy development costs such as declining health and education, disruption of social services, disintegrated communities, broken infrastructure, and forced migration.¹

Recently, in its 2015 Human Development Report, the UN Development Programme asserted that violent extremism not only deprives people of their freedoms, but limits opportunities to “expand their capabilities”.

A sustained high level of insecurity has adverse implications for the socio-economic prospects for individuals and communities, and impedes the advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but there are other terrorism implications as well.

Refugees, forced migrants and internally displaced persons have been identified as at-risk groups, vulnerable to recruitment and radicalisation to violence in contexts where they are not integrated and lack human

The emergence of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has created a greater sense of urgency for many governments as they grapple with the outpouring of refugees; with national security concerns raised by the prospective return of foreign fighters; and the exacerbation of existing conflicts by the ideology and tactics exported by the group. While emerging from al-Qaeda, ISIL has premised its legitimacy on purporting to offer a just and effective state that ostensibly addresses many of the grievances of citizens in the region.³

In its communications, ISIL does not portray itself as a secretive terrorist group, but rather as a welcoming state that seeks to offer its citizens healthcare, basic services, protection and infrastructure. In many ways, much of its recruitment material speaks the language of state-building and development, although it does not shy away from the use of brutality to assert itself. The need to understand and respond to the development and security deficits that drive ISIL's support and assumed legitimacy is therefore critical.

Findings about the localised and individualised nature of drivers of violent extremism indicate that many of the UN's core goals on preventing conflict and promoting human rights and sustainable development can be key to reducing the appeal of terrorism.

This was underscored in January 2015 when the UN Security Council described the relationship between security and development as “closely interlinked and mutually reinforcing and key to attaining sustainable peace”. The Secretary-General's Plan of Action on Preventing Violent Extremism makes a clear association between PVE and development, calling for national and regional PVE action plans and encouraging member states to align their development policies with the Sustainable Development Goals, many of which were highlighted as critical to addressing global drivers of violent extremism and enhancing community resilience.

The newly adopted SDGs reflect this approach, especially Goal 16 on the promotion of just, peaceful and inclusive societies. This is particularly important

because among the common denominators of violent radicalisation are marginalisation (real or perceived), unmet expectations or inequality (especially aligned with ethnic or religious divisions), and human rights infractions. Additionally, a target of Goal 16 is to: “strengthen relevant national institutions, including through international cooperation, for building capacity at all levels, in particular in developing countries, to prevent violence and combat terrorism and crime”.

Development response

In adopting the 2030 Agenda, international actors recognised that peaceful and inclusive societies cannot be achieved without sustainable development, and vice versa. Furthermore, a shared aspect of Goal 16 and CVE is the recognition of the vital roles of women in both countering violent ideologies and working as peacebuilders, which was reflected in Security Council Resolution 2242 in 2015 following the high-level review of Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, which was adopted in 2000. Women play varied roles in relation to terrorism, from victims to perpetrators to preventers. Their roles in preventing violence and conflict, including violent extremism, are reflected in SDG 16's advocacy of peaceful and inclusive societies that uphold the rule of law for both men and women.

A number of national and international actors, such as Australia, Denmark, Norway, the United States, the United Kingdom and the European Union, have underscored the synergy between CVE and development. In addition, the potential linkage between the SDGs and CVE objectives has been welcomed by many governments and practitioners as complementary approaches that seek to deny extremist groups the oxygen they need by addressing many of the grievances on which they prey. In addition, a number of organisations and actors have already identified ways of bridging security with development.⁴

However, a critical impediment to more integrated efforts both at the political and operational levels is a legacy of distrust characterised by concerns about

the ‘securitisation’ of development and humanitarian efforts; the protection of staff and civilians; and bureaucratic silos that were not designed to address the complex and inter-connected transnational threats confronting the UN and its members today.

These concerns are compounded by the fact that CVE suffers from a lack of conceptual clarity, which contributes to confusion about its parameters, objectives, timelines and impact – further leading to wariness among some policymakers and practitioners. Moving further upstream also raises questions about the boundaries between preventing and countering violent extremism, and development assistance.

If development is done right – particularly in areas vulnerable to violent extremism – what is the added value of PVE and CVE measures? Can traditional development approaches be effective in the face of the evolving security challenge posed by groups like ISIL, Boko Haram and their ilk, where traditional lines between criminal, political and terrorist violence are increasingly blurred?

Bridging the divide

Among the SDGs, Goal 16 presents a valuable opportunity to bridge the development and security divide. It explicitly provides an entry point for development and security actors to come together to promote inclusive, multidimensional approaches to achieve a peaceful society.

In particular, CVE presents one avenue to pursue the achievement of Goal 16. Development actors might find it easier – and perhaps more palatable – to engage with CVE experts and practitioners given their hesitation and concerns about interacting with pure security or counterterrorism actors.

That said, this approach will not be a panacea as it is unlikely to address some of the ideological, material or political factors that may contribute to support for violent extremism. In addition, there are considerable challenges in integrating CVE objectives in stabilisation and development programmes, as well as in implementing CVE initiatives in fragile and conflict-affected areas, due for instance to lack of access, resources and capacities.⁵



© AFP Photo/Roberto Schmidt

◀ Palestinian boys watch as Hamas militants parade in Shejaiya, Gaza, following the brutal conflict with Israel in 2014. The highest levels of terrorism are in countries experiencing ongoing conflicts, where children are particularly vulnerable to recruitment

balanced security responses to threats and the constant reaffirmation of the UN Secretary-General's Human Rights up Front initiative, which seeks to ensure early and effective action to prevent or respond to large-scale violations of human rights or international humanitarian law. ●

- 1 Frances Stewart, "Development and Security", *Conflict, Security and Development*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2004), pp. 261-88. Institute for Economics & Peace, "Global Terrorism Index 2015", 17 November 2015 <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2015.pdf>
- 2 Stephen J. Schulhofer, Tom R. Tyler, and Aziz Z. Huq, "American Policing at a Crossroads: Unsustainable Policies and the Procedural Justice Alternative", *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* Vol 101, No. 2 (2011), 335-374, <http://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc/vol101/iss2/1/>
- 3 Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Benjamin Sugg, "A Tale of Two Jihads: Comparing the al-Qaeda and ISIS Narratives", *International Peace Institute Global Observatory*, February 9, 2015: <http://theglobalobservatory.org/2015/02/jihad-al-qaeda-isis-counternarrative/>
- 4 See for example: Thomas Wheeler, etc. "From Agreement to Action: Building Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies Through the 2030 Agenda", *Saferworld*, September 2015, www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/999-from-agreement-to-action-building-peaceful-just-and-inclusive-societies-through-the-2030-agenda; and Khalid Koser and Amy Cunningham, "Countering Violent Extremism: Falling Between the Cracks of Development and Security", *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 2015, <http://blogs.cfr.org/development-channel/2015/08/26/countering-violent-extremism-falling-between-the-cracks-of-development-and-security/>
- 5 Julian Brett, Kristina Bro Eriksen, Anne Kirstine Rønn Sørensen, and Tana Copenhagen Aps, "Lessons Learned from Danish and Other International Efforts on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) in Development Contexts", *Evaluation Study*, 2015, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, <http://um.dk/da/-/media/UM/Danish-site/Documents/Udenrigspolitik/Fred-sikkerhed-og-retsorden/201503StudyCVE.pdf>

The authors would like to thank Eelco Kessels and Christina Nemr whose forthcoming Policy Brief on these issues informed this article. The authors would also like to thank Benjamin Sugg for his research support.

Nevertheless, to achieve Goal 16, there will be a need for development actors to engage with security institutions particularly when working in environments (especially fragile and post-conflict ones) that may be vulnerable to terrorism and violent extremism.

This is where CVE can prove a valuable vehicle for bringing together state officials, law enforcement agencies, civil society and communities to formulate collaborative strategies. CVE actors have already laid some valuable groundwork through efforts to enhance community resilience, strengthen community policing and foster greater understanding of the drivers.

For those looking to work on Goal 16, an exchange of lessons learned and good practices in this space could prove useful. On the development side, strengthening local institutions and political empowerment will be key to the successful implementation of SDG 16, which will implicitly promote means of addressing local grievances through a non-violent, bottom-up process. These objectives are also important to addressing many of the drivers of violent extremism and can therefore contribute to CVE even if that is not their primary objective.

Some caution must be exercised in considering the overlap between the

SDGs and CVE. Rather than consider them inherently linked, the relationship is better framed as one of mutual benefit between programming that supports complementary goals. Development programming can benefit from a CVE lens where there are concerns about extremist activity, and lessons learned from development can inform the implementation of context-sensitive, sustainable CVE efforts.

While CVE remains a nascent and evolving area of practice, lessons learned regarding implementation and impact can also help inform development efforts in an environment where extremism is a concern. Enhancing opportunities for policymakers and practitioners from both fields to interact and collaborate will help build trust, a key element to successful partnerships.

The UN is well positioned to help create such a multi-stakeholder platform. However, multilateral development efforts must be seen as part of a comprehensive approach to addressing terrorism, violent extremism and conflict, just as CVE efforts can be seen as one instrument in the SDG toolkit. These efforts must be accompanied by political solutions to armed conflicts,