POLICY NOTE

GETTING IT RIGHT: policy recommendations for preventing and countering violent extremism

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

In 2017, CRS contracted CDA Learning Collaborative to provide recommendations for CRS' decision-making toward funding for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE). The research and analysis looked at the following:

- Emerging consensus and remaining controversy about **the drivers of violent extremism** (VE) as well as emerging evidence about **promising P/CVE approaches**;

- **How P/CVE programs are structured** and funded, how this aligns with CRS' Mission and principles, and relevant experiences from peer agencies with P/CVE funding; and

- **Lessons learned from peer agencie**s in making go/ no-go decisions, implementing P/CVE programming, engaging local partners, and mitigating risks.

This policy paper utilizes the rich review of literature and findings from key informant interviews to distill policy recommendations for donors and policy makers, including the US Government as it formulates its new policy around P/CVE. It also includes an exploration of additional field perspectives through key informant interviews with CRS justice and peacebuilding staff in the Philippines, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, and Kenya.

CRS' UNIQUE VANTAGE POINT

Our perspective draws from our identity as a values-led faith-based implementer of humanitarian and development assistance in over 150 countries around the world. While CRS does not currently implement programs that have explicit P/CVE objectives, we implement peacebuilding projects around the world, through inter-religious platforms and proven methodologies including the 3-B's (binding, bridging and bonding)[1]. Our justice and peacebuilding work saves lives threatened by violent conflict by building or restoring healthy relationships. CRS works with its partners, often faith-based and other civil society organizations, to empower the marginalized to use their voices and transform unjust institutions that are often drivers of violent conflict.[2] CRS remains committed to conflict sensitivity so that, at a minimum, it does no harm in all its interventions.

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1   For more information, see Jean-Baptiste Talla, "The Ties that Bind: Building Social Cohesion in Divided Communities," CRS, 2017. crs.org/sites/default/files/tools-research/crs_ties_rev-08-03-2017_web.pdf.

2   Frances Stewart, ed., Horizontal Inequalities and Conflict: Understanding Group Violence in Multiethnic Societies (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

DEFINING P/CVE

A noted definitional gap for "violent extremism" frames the challenges around the debate of working toward preventing or countering violent extremism (P/CVE). The last US Government CVE joint strategy from USAID and State Department describes the effort as supporting "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 and radicalization to violence."[3]

While CVE was intended as a complement, and in some ways a counterbalance, to the counter-terrorism agendas of previous US administrations, the extent to which it has achieved those aims is debated. Some argue that CVE reframes the counter-terrorism agenda but continues to undermine security and "instrumentalize" development efforts in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.[4] Others note that despite gaps in evidence and proof of efficacy, to not address CVE would be counter-productive.[5]

The United Nations coined the term "PVE"—prevention of violent extremism—recognizing the need "to take a more comprehensive approach which encompasses not only ongoing, essential security-based counter-terrorism measures, but also systematic preventive measures which directly address the drivers of violent extremism that have given rise to the emergence of these new and more virulent groups."[6]

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT VIOLENT EXTREMISM?

In general, the evidence base for understanding drivers of VE and what works and what does not is weak. There are few assessments and evaluations. This is what we do know:

- **Dynamics related to VE vary greatly from context to context** (across countries, within different areas of one nation-state, etc.), and they need to be understood in a context-specific way.

- **To understand the specific drivers of VE, it is important to understand the overall conflict context and political economy**—VE does not exist in isolation. Understanding the interplay between push factors (structural, socio-economic drivers of VE) and pull factors (specific factors that pull people into radicalizing and joining VE groups) is critical. There is no consensus on exactly what this interplay looks like and again it varies from context to context.

- Based on emerging experience across some organizations, and in line with the findings on evidence supported drivers of VE, **promising areas of engagement** include projects that:
  - o strengthen (local and national) governance systems with a focus on inclusion, equal access to government services across different parts of society, and the social contract;
  - o address economic, social, and political inequalities and marginalization of certain groups, or perceptions of inequality and marginalization;
  - o focus on addressing the lack of trust between and across communities and try to work towards positive changes in discourse and behavior;
  - o focus on constructive youth engagement by going beyond simplistic and wrong assumptions (e.g. "job creation will stop radicalization");
  - o prevent the instrumentalization and abuse of sectarian, religious, and ethnic identities; or
  - o focus on (re-)establishing trust between communities, governments and security forces, and across communities.

- From a **process and methodological perspective**, evidence supports that promising approaches will:[7]
  - o understand dynamics around VE as part of a broader picture of the drivers of conflict and violence in a given setting;
  - o apply a holistic approach that focus on structural drivers as well as specific drivers of VE at individual or community levels (push and pull factors);

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3   See "US State Department and USAID Joint Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism," May 2016. pdf.usaid.Gov/pdf_docs/PBAAE503.pdf, p. 4.

4   For a more detailed discussion of these critiques see Larry Attree, "Shouldn't YOU be Countering Violent Extremism?" Saferworld, 2017. saferworld-indepth.squarespace.com/.

5   "Preventing, Not Just Countering, Violent Extremism," Lawfare, April 29, 2018. lawfareblog.com/preventing-not-just-countering-violent-extremism

6   See "Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism," United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, (2015). un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/en/plan-action-prevent-violent-extremism, p. 2.

7   See, for example, Louisa Waugh and Mana Farooghi, "They Treat us all like Jihadis: Looking beyond Violent Extremism to Building Peace in Mali." International Alert,2016. international-alert.org/publications/they-treat-us-all-like-jihadis-en.

o don't tackle only symptoms, but also focus on addressing underlying conditions that drive VE, such as exclusive governance or corruption;

o focus on listening and responding to the concerns, priorities and potentials of conflict-affected people and communities;

o strongly consider conflict sensitivity and risk management principles to ensure "doing no harm" in very complex and quickly changing contexts;

o frame VE as a problem that can and does arise in all faith and ideological communities;

o invest in solid design, monitoring, and evaluation (DM&E) systems and appropriate P/CVE indicators; and

o coordinate closely with other efforts in similar areas—among INGOs, national NGOs and donors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on empirical evidence as well as two decades of experience gained from implementing peacebuilding programs in over 100 countries, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) offers the following recommendations to the US Government (USG) as it refines its policy and approach to P/CVE:

Understand and Frame Violent Extremism Appropriately

1. **Use the "violent extremism" label judiciously and evenhandedly.** While the acts of groups like ISIS, Al Qaeda and Al Shabab have dominated the global conversation, violent extremism (VE) is a phenomenon that can arise in any faith or political tradition and should be treated as such. VE is only one aspect of larger political economies and conflict systems, and too narrow a focus risks both misunderstanding conflict actors and their dynamics, and formulating a flawed, potentially counterproductive response.[8] Additionally, singling out one faith tradition or ideology for VE generates justifiable complaints of prejudice as well as acts of reprisal. Finally, attaching a negative label to the faith tradition of citizens of a few conflict-affected countries, who disproportionately suffer the violence perpetrated by extremist groups, only adds insult to injury, enabling a narrative of grievance and further marginalization.

2. **Be aware that confusion between P/CVE and CT can undermine outcomes.** In theory, P/CVE programming is intended to complement and serve as a distinct alternative to USG counter-terrorism (CT) interventions. In practice, maintaining such a distinction is difficult, both in program design and implementation. The result is often that the

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8   Indeed, there is a noted definitional gap about what constitutes violent extremism, in addition to competing understandings of the purpose and scope of CVE and PVE approaches.

Photo by Andrew McConnell for CRS

communities CRS serves and local VE groups cannot distinguish between these efforts, both of which are perceived to be intended to delegitimize and ultimately destroy VE groups. Reining in CT efforts may help protect against undermining legitimate development, peacebuilding or governance programs.

The USG should fully understand the role, both real and perceived, that the USG itself plays in a conflict, including through its CT measures. Our research shows that many people have a general level of mistrust towards the USG given its complex history with counter-terrorism strategies—even though they might actually play a positive role in certain contexts.

This also points to the **importance of improving inter-agency communication, coordination and policy coherence**. USAID might consider its programs to be apolitical and primarily technical in addressing the structural drivers of violent extremism. Still, its programs can be mistaken for or undermined by CT and other securitized approaches being used by the Departments of State, Defense or the US Government as a whole.[9] Likewise, US-based implementing partners may be associated (fairly or not) to such securitized measures, which may hamper their ability to carry out effective development and humanitarian work.

3. **Take a systems approach, focusing on deep analysis and understanding of local contexts.** Like all conflict, VE needs to be understood in a context-specific as well as systemic way. VE does not exist in a vacuum; rather, specific drivers of VE need to be understood in relationship with those of violent conflict, in the larger context of conflict systems and political economies. For this reason, a thorough **context analysis**, conducted with active participation by **local experts** and **stakeholders**, must inform the design of any P/CVE response.

Particularly important is understanding the interplay between the push factors (structural, socio-economic drivers) and pull factors (specific factors that pull people into radicalizing and joining VE groups) of VE. Research shows that the biggest drivers of violent conflict include "government failure to provide basic services such as health, education, welfare," and the "coinciding inequality and institutionalized discrimination (along) religious, sectarian, or ethnic fault lines," i.e., *horizontal inequity*.[10] Programs that choose to avoid these issues are likely to fail at reducing the key drivers of violent conflict and addressing the primary concerns of the people and communities who suffer most from violent extremism.

Implement P/CVE Judiciously

4. **Avoid integrating P/CVE with development, peacebuilding or governance programs.** Too closely linking humanitarian or development work with P/CVE can reduce program effectiveness and risks the very source of our legitimacy-adherence to international humanitarian and other core principles. Well-designed development, peacebuilding and governance programming can address the drivers of VE and reduce violence and recruitment as secondary and tertiary effects. Rather than strengthen such programs' potential to address VE push factors, the inclusion of P/CVE objectives creates confusion and suspicion over ulterior motives and reduces program effectiveness.

5. **Be transparent about P/CVE aims and objectives, and explicit about theories of change.** Development, peacebuilding and governance programming should never be used as a cover to achieve P/CVE, never mind CT, objectives. Theories of change linking these approaches and the anticipated P/CVE outcomes are often implicit, and not fully articulated. Without clarity about objectives and assumed change pathways, it is difficult to measure success. Further, much of the more effective P/CVE programming uses well-established approaches derived from the governance, livelihoods, education, and peacebuilding fields. However, attaching P/CVE outcomes, such as reduced recruitment, to a governance program designed to improve state-society relations, can narrow the target population to at-risk young men when that may not be the most appropriate target audience for the governance program. At minimum, P/CVE objectives and their rationale should be made explicit.

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9   The US is of particular concern, and associational risks due to the US approach and views of CVE is increasingly risky for US actors.

10 Anita Ernstorfer and Michelle Garred, "Research on Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism" (Report for Catholic Relief Services, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, March 1, 2018).

6. **Adopt measures to guard against the P/CVE agenda being used for state repression and increased securitization.** The state has the primary responsibility to address and counter violent extremism. Yet P/CVE is regularly misused and manipulated by repressive governments to brand individuals and organizations with opposing views as "violent extremists."[11] Increased securitization and state repression can close civil society spaces, leading to a cycle of disenfranchised, disempowered people who may opt for violence to resolve disputes, express dissent or advance their political interests. For example, in the Philippines, the enactment of martial law in response to attacks by terror groups caused undue destruction, fueling additional frustration of civilians and may have led to increased recruits for VE groups.

   Therefore, donors should understand the potential negative impacts of providing bilateral funding and diplomatic support to repressive states. Safeguards and conditions should be included in any bilateral agreement to ensure that the pursuit of security objectives in no way results in reduced civic space or access to justice.

7. **Utilize procurement mechanisms that facilitate addressing the proximate and root causes, not just the effects of the problems.** Because they lack the flexibility needed to adapt to changes in complex and rapidly shifting environments, contracts are far from optimal as a procurement mechanism to address VE. As well, the "notwithstanding" authority typically employed by parts of the US Government to rapidly procure and award P/CVE contracts often fails to achieve the intended short-term quick-wins, never mind sustained progress in reducing the push factors of violent extremism.[12] Such interventions risk doing more harm than good.

   Instead, the US Government should u**se assistance mechanisms** that engage implementing partners' access prior to the publication of the assistance/acquisition instrument to express their concerns,

as well as share emerging promising practices. In addition, **grant timelines should be extended to five years**. Such changes will allow implementing partners to **employ adaptive management** approaches that include **quality improvement** mechanisms. **Co-creation**, through a **partnership approach**, is also important to actively engage civil society and community members in the design, implementation, monitoring, learning and evaluation of effective project approaches.

Protect the role of civil society

8. **Ensure implementers can maintain international humanitarian and peacebuilding principles while remaining conflict sensitive.** The international humanitarian principles of independence and impartiality uphold the legitimacy of humanitarian work and protect the lives of humanitarian actors, their local partners and beneficiaries. P/CVE-related projects should **never require or encourage them to compromise these principles** by asking them to gather and share intelligence or risk being perceived as collaborating or coordinating with security sector actors.[13]

   This imperative points to the need for a **carefully bounded relationship** between donors and implementing partners so that the sensitivities of working on P/CVE are addressed. Such partnerships value the input and experience of implementing partners because they have a strong track record of balancing their obligation to uphold humanitarian and other core principles with their commitment to meet program quality standards and donor expectations.

9. **Affirm the legitimacy of local civil society perspectives and avoid their instrumentalization.** As alluded to above, **civil society can and should play a unique role in contributing to social change, while empowering people to engage state actors at their level**.[14] As one CRS staffer put it, "If the response is to beef up the military, it's not going to solve our problems. We have learned in

11 "We Need to Talk About Egypt: How Brutal 'Counter-Terrorism' is Failing Egypt and Its Allies," Saferworld, October 2017. saferworld.org.uk/resources/news-and-analysis/post/739-.

12 Marian Leonardo Lawson, "USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives After 15 Years: Issues for Congress," US Congressional Research Service (R-40600), May 27, 2009. everycrsreport.com/files/20090527_R40600_92252119ff05220fd70aadb14edeca632184f42c.pdf.

13 This aligns with new guidance on what CVE approaches can be included in ODA. See OECD-DAC Communiqué. February 19, 2016. oecd.org/dac/DAC-HLM-Communique-2016.pdf.

14 In the example where martial law was enacted, the respondent mentioned that the force used was disproportionate to the threat. In that case, community leaders knew the relatives or neighbors of perpetrators and could have worked through these relationships at least to start.

peacebuilding that the use of hard power does not address the structural issues."

A civil society-led approach can help achieve a more nuanced appreciation of the roles, contributions, and interests of religious and secular actors, and help mitigate against the instrumentalization of religion—especially religious leaders and institutions—in P/CVE. Engaging religious bodies and leaders is not a quick fix for VE, nor should they be seen solely as interpretive bodies, but considered for their multifaceted roles in the community, often including secular functions such as promoting civic engagement, delivering social services, etc. While religious leaders can play a positive role, they may also undermine P/CVE objectives, instead acting as gate-keepers and failing to credibly represent or to be attuned to the needs, interests and anxieties expressed by the communities they serve.[15]

10. **Understand and address the complex identities of women and youth, without instrumentalizing their role in violent extremism.** Research has emphasized the importance of examining the role of women and youth in the context of violent extremism, and the body of knowledge continues to grow. Yet concerns exist that, at best, P/CVE programs are missing an opportunity to increase gender equity and youth inclusion. At worst, P/CVE programs reinforce stereotypes, putting these women and youth at risk by categorizing them either as victims or potential recruits.[16] For example, P/CVE programs often instrumentalize women in their stereotypical role in the home, to act as informant on their families and communities, stripping them of agency, reinforcing gender norms and placing them at great risk of violence. These approaches fail to reinforce women's and youth's sense of agency so that they develop *their* solutions to *their* problems. Instead, poorly-designed P/CVE programs put them at risk of being perceived as collaborators of the USG and/or repressive host country governments.

Therefore, women and youth should be actively **engaged as *equal* partners in both shaping peace and security processes and participating in community-based responses** to violent conflict that ultimately contribute to reducing the barriers to their equitable access to decision-making.[17]

Build Learning and Evidence

11. **Invest in learning and evidence.** While there is vast and growing literature on the drivers of VE, many existing strategies and programs are designed based on *anecdotal* rather than empirical evidence about the drivers of VE. Coupled with weak or missing theories of change, program designers potentially do harm, using this trial-and-error approach to programming. At the same time, research has shown that the most effective approaches to addressing the push factors of VE can be found in well-established peacebuilding and governance approaches. The insufficient incorporation of learning from these fields leads to overlooking or retrofitting such approaches to validate empirically unfounded preconceptions of VE, and ineffective, potentially harmful programming.

Therefore, donors should **encourage learning and sharing of approaches within and across countries and regions**, while also **incentivizing applications of emerging best practices** to new program design. In the past 10 years the peacebuilding and governance communities of practice have developed several new monitoring and evaluation tools, many of which can and should be applied to P/CVE programming.

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15 Directorate General for International Cooperation and Development, "Operational Guidelines on the preparation and implementation of EU financed actions specific to countering terrorism and violent extremism in third countries," European Commission, November 21, 2017. ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/eu_ct_cve_guidelines.pdf.

16 Anna Möller-Loswick, "The Countering Violent Extremism Agenda Risks Undermining Women Who Need Greater Support," Saferworld, April 26, 2017. saferworld.org.uk/resources/news-and-analysis/post/221-the-countering-violent-extremism-agenda-risks-undermining-women-who-need-greater-support.

17 USAID, "Promising Practices in Engaging Youth in Peace and Security and PVE/CVE: Summary of Key Interventions and Examples," Peace Exchange, August 2017. dmeforpeace.org/peacexchange/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Promising-Practices-Engaging-Youth-in-Peace-and-Security.pdf.