SAFEGUARDING COHESION AND DIALOGUE

Beyond A Standard Prevention Narrative

Youth Without Borders Organization for Development, Yemen

CIVIL SOCIETY **PLATFORM** FOR PEACEBUILDING AND STATEBUILDING

About Us

The <u>Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding</u> (CSPPS) is a member-led international network composed of civil society actors, practitioners, experts, and academics from the Global South and North who work together on advancing Sustainable Development Goal 16+, conflict and crisis prevention, peacebuilding, and statebuilding in fragile and conflict-affected settings. We operate in over 30 different countries around the globe. Since 2011, CSPPS has acted as the central platform where civil society ideas are generated, where progress is discussed regarding peacebuilding and statebuilding goals, and where consensus is sought on the course of action to be taken with respect to the <u>International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding</u> (IDPS).

List of Acronyms Used

CECORE – Center for Conflict Resolution
COVID-19 – Coronavirus Disease 2019
C/PVE – Countering/Preventing Violent Extremism
CSO – Civil Society Organisation
CSPPS – Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding
CT – Counterterrorism
DRC – Democratic Republic of the Congo
GBV – Gender-Based Violence
GPPAC – Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict
IDPS – International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding
PVE – Preventing/Prevention of Violent Extremism
SGBV – Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
UN – United Nations
UNDP – United Nations Development Programme
UNSCR – United Nations Security Council Resolution
VE – Violent Extremism
WPS – Women, Peace, and Security
YPS – Youth, Peace, and Security

Introduction

The objective of this report is to catalogue and highlight civil society's valuable contributions to the prevention of violent extremism (PVE) in order to solidify its place within the international community on this topic. By consolidating relevant information from partners and stakeholders, we also seek to establish best practices for state and non-state actors alike, and to share them with our partners in international communities like the Just Future alliance, in order to continue responding to violent extremism (VE) and radicalisation.

In addition to recognising the value of PVE as opposed to overly securitised response measures, we propose to move beyond this narrative and evaluate needs before societal actors are further radicalised, become violent, and engage in acts of extremism. Indeed, PVE inscribes itself in a negative discourse of social fragmentation and breakdown of national cohesion. Reinforcing social cohesion by reconciling differences, among ethnic or religious groups, for instance, is a critical step to preventing violent extremism. Taking a look at this topic through the lens of community interventions before radicalisation and extremism start to appear would offer a new perspective.

This approach is also centred on the role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) working to foster dialogue and community building, who therefore play a part in prevention. As a global network of civil society actors, practitioners, and experts, CSPPS also has a role to play in amplifying, lobbying, and creating networks to support our partners. CSPPS sees a clear link between PVE and its mission to amplify the voices of local civil society, demonstrating the importance of developing knowledge on the topic.

Context

The concept of violent extremism and its prevention is difficult to pin down, and only loosely defined at the international level. Based on a review of relevant literature and statements, the Geneva Centre for Security Policy defines the issue as a "violent type of mobilisation that aims to elevate the status of one group, while excluding or dominating its 'others' based on markers, such as gender, religion, culture and ethnicity. In doing so, violent extremist organisations destroy existing political and cultural institutions, and supplant them with alternative governance structures that work according to the principles of a totalitarian and intolerant ideology [1]." Programmes to prevent violent extremism work through less militarised methods to develop sustainable and just communities [2].These programmes involve a variety of stakeholders, including national and international authorities, civil society actors, and traditional and religious institutions that collaborate to acknowledge and mitigate concerns before they lead to conflict and extremism.

Violent extremism in fragile and conflict affected areas does not occur in a vacuum. Responses to this issue thus need to span different fields, taking into account the linkages between root causes. For instance, a lack of employment opportunities, especially among youth, can push young people to join violent groups that offer a small salary and a sense of purpose.

Corruption and lack of government transparency can also be a factor that draws communities to extremism; if populations mistrust the government and believe elections and democratic processes to be unjust or corrupt, they may feel that they have no other outlet to express their opinions and enact change, potentially leading to violence.

In the United Nations' General Assembly Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, the Secretary General of the United Nations (UN) recognises the rise of violent extremism within local contexts of grievances and injustices [3]. As the plan illustrates, security-based counterterrorism (CT) is not a sufficient response, and coherent approaches encompassing "systematic preventative measures" must be developed [4]. Additional challenges, such as the growing securitisation of aid in the context of countering and preventing violent extremism (C/PVE), have also been acknowledged as risks to building lasting peace. Indeed, a growing body of research in recent years has been calling for a change in "the abusive military-security responses that make it impossible for more constructive approaches to succeed [5]."

Approach

In light of this insufficiency of security-based counterterrorism, civil society is often equipped to act and respond better to the challenges of radicalisation thanks to its grassroots community-building capacities. CSOs can identify trends early on and act before they develop into violent extremism, intervening before these dangerous sentiments take root in communities. They have the tools and local knowledge to engage with vulnerable communities and foster social cohesion. Through this report, CSPPS intends to shed light on the critical role of CSOs to create opportunities for information-sharing, exchanging best practices, and renewing their work at the international level. Highlighting the perspectives of local stakeholders directly allows us to introduce an alternative discourse to counterterrorism and reclaim the prevention narrative, from military operations and human rights violations, to one that addresses root causes and ties in with pre-existing peacebuilding and statebuilding goals.

This work is also linked to the global networking efforts of CSPPS within the Just Future alliance, which focuses on security, justice, and inclusive political decision-making in Afghanistan, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), South Sudan, Mali, and Niger. As several of these countries are affected by violent extremism, it is capital to continue lobbying, advocacy, and support for local leadership of CSOs within this consortium.

Establishing cross-border linkages and identifying similarities for joint problem-solving is an important step in addressing VE, one that CSPPS and its partners can encourage and facilitate.

This report is the result of collaboration between CSPPS member CSOs, their partners, and the CSPPS Secretariat. Its underlying analysis is founded on substantial consultation surveys to which CSPPS partners and affiliated organisations have responded. It also seeks to provide an overview of the limitations of traditional counterterrorism, CSO response to trends of violent extremism, and how this response can be improved through national and international support.

This report is divided into four sections. The first gives an outline of the issues addressed and provides a more general background of PVE and civil society action on this topic, including key findings on social trust and cohesion. The second section presents a case study of local efforts to prevent VE in the DRC, focusing in particular on the youth angle and the relation between PVE and the youth, peace, and security (YPS) agenda. The third part offers a similar perspective from Cameroon and includes additional findings on the gender dimensions of VE and its prevention. Ultimately, the report concludes with reflections on how to promote and revitalise a prevention narrative that comprehensively incorporates the voices of local peacebuilders.

Background on Civil Society Response to Violent Extremism

Spanning the African continent and Southeast Asia, our survey respondents identified similar root causes to violent extremism and similar frustrations at a securitised approach to these issues. In many contexts, unrest due to poor governance, lack of infrastructure or other services, low education and unemployment rates, or religious intolerance, have created opportunities for VE to flourish. Governments have not always adequately fulfilled their role in providing social amenities, developing infrastructure, and building public trust. Therefore, prevention is a critical topic in peacebuilding, and CSOs are essential actors in such activities.

CSO Activities to Prevent Violent Extremism
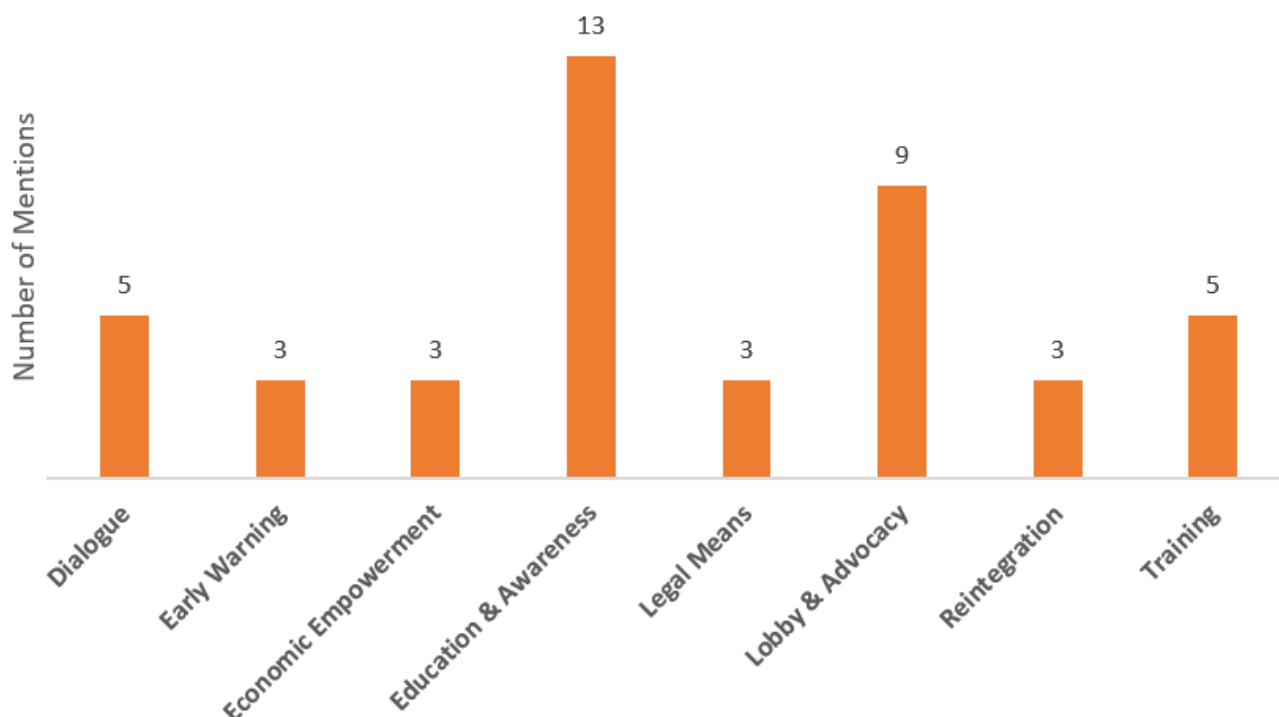
CSO activities to prevent violent extremism, as mentioned by survey respondents

"Civil society often has extensive knowledge of the local dynamics, trends and drivers of violent extremism, and presents the best "early warning" mechanisms for emerging threats.

In addition, civil society has the capacity and experience in working on programmes that foster peaceful and inclusive societies, and mitigate structural conditions that are conducive to the spread of violent extremism.

Civil Society Organisations are an important source of information, and regularly undertake extensive research on various topics including the trends relating to PVE.

And lastly, CSOs build bridges of dialogue and reconciliation between the aggrieved communities and parties to the conflict by acting as facilitators for conflict resolution."

[IIDA | Somalia]

Our civil society respondents shared several of their initiatives that directly or indirectly prevent violent extremism. For instance, some noted engaging with religious institutions to promote awareness of extremism and facilitate dialogue and mediation between different communities. Association Rayons de Soleil, a CSPPS member from Cameroon, mentioned civil society-led training for young religious people to become peace ambassadors, and bridge gaps between Christian and Muslim communities through sensitisation and community workshops. According to our partner, these efforts were critical in understanding some of the inter-religious tensions arising from the spread of Boko Haram in recent years.

In Somalia too, CSOs have been instrumental in fostering inter-religious dialogue to offset the allure of al-Shabaab and Daesh. With religious intolerance listed as one of the causes of VE by our survey respondents, it is particularly important for our partners in the region, like IIDA Women's Development Organisation, to work with these institutions to promote a culture of peace and non-violence. Beyond engaging with religious leaders and elders to disseminate positive messaging, IIDA has facilitated mediation between government and extremists, promoted rehabilitation of former combatants, and implemented programming to tackle the issue of children associated with armed fighters.

Prevention should take into account historical contexts, power dynamics, and local complexities. CSOs and local peacebuilders are the natural experts and mediators of these questions on the ground. When asked how they defined PVE, survey respondents addressed several different aspects of community resilience. According to respondents, community resilience encompasses efforts to reinforce a community's capabilities to respond to threats and challenges, such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, or environmental changes. In the context of PVE, these include psycho-social support to heal from trauma, income-generating activities to combat poverty, tension reduction, and reintegration. An additional pillar of community resilience that several respondents mentioned was trust, ensuring an open relationship between governing authorities, non-governmental actors, and local communities.

> "Prevention of violent extremism is to systematically and proactively address the push and pull factors that lead people to become violent. This includes countering and providing alternatives to extremist narratives."
>
> [CSDEA | Nigeria]

One significant trend emerging from survey responses was the importance of social cohesion. 84% of survey participants agreed that social trust and national cohesion were capital elements to minimising the emergence and escalation of extreme violence. Based on our survey responses, social cohesion can be exemplified by mutual trust between governments, civil society, and citizens, and the inclusion of marginalised stakeholders in decision-making and programming to promote human rights and dialogue. This process reinforces PVE by bringing together communities through relationship-building and the reduction of potential drivers of extremism, such as marginalisation. One respondent explained that bolstering social cohesion by encouraging the participation of youth and women in democratic processes, for example, directly supports PVE. With their work on the ground, CSOs have a unique ability to address conflict issues with relevant stakeholders in an effective and timely manner.

> "Social cohesion acts to repair evil, to repair divisions, etc. Social cohesion must be practiced upstream, in everyday life and in daily conduct, to prevent the various forms of discontent of social actors at any level."
>
> [REPAOC | Senegal]

Case Study
The Role of Youth in Violent Extremism and its Prevention in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Five respondents from the DRC noted similar root causes of VE in their country. These included mainly socio-economic and political factors, such as high unemployment, especially among youth; inter-ethnic conflict; or poverty and lack of education. Many of these factors are linked to state weakness and poor governance, as the state is unable to provide necessary services to marginalised and under-developed communities.

"We encourage youth to take responsibility for the causes of peace, diversity, and mutual respect, so that they contribute to the fight against violent extremism rather than fuel it."

[WILPF | DRC]

Local peacebuilders work to identify and address these grievances before they drive actors into VE. 80% of respondents from the DRC carry out activities directly focused on PVE, most notably through dialogue and inclusive participation with marginalised actors like youth to ensure their inclusive participation. CSOs' direct involvement at the local level is therefore critical to identifying and mitigating trends in VE.

This focus on youth in PVE goes even beyond the DRC. The Center for Conflict Resolution (CECORE), a respondent from Uganda, highlighted their Youth Peace Champion programme, which trains and rehabilitates young people who were exposed to violence.

After participating in this programme, young people are more familiar with conflict resolution and advocate against human rights violations. In the region in which the project was implemented, CECORE and its partner the Global Alliance for Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) even measured a decrease in violence due to cattle raiding [6].

CSOs are not the only actors on the ground supporting PVE efforts, nor should they be. According to our respondents, the government of the DRC has made efforts towards disarmament and security sector reform. In addition to some military initiatives, the government promotes disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programmes, as well as action plans that include United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 to advance women's rights during conflict and their involvement in post-conflict peace processes [7]. Only 60% of responding CSOs from the DRC, however, reported being satisfied with civil society inclusion in these programmes and collaboration with the government in the context of PVE. Moreover, they expressed dissatisfaction with how the government has addressed extremism so far, with some respondents mentioning debatable results in current government strategies. This demonstrates the need for governments to continue working with CSOs to understand the effects of securitised CT policies on the ground and support local peacebuilders in fostering social cohesion before unrest erupts into violence and extremism.

Many of the root causes of violent extremism affect young people in particular. Survey respondents listed factors such as low employment and education rates, misinformation and misunderstanding of religious and political ideologies, and even feelings of abandonment and desperation, that can push youth into extremism. Moreover, young people can lack information on participation in democratic processes like elections, and need to be educated on how they can contribute to peacebuilding and dialogue. Extremist groups can take advantage of these factors to manipulate and instrumentalise young people, and recruit them into their groups. Survey respondents noted, however, that beyond being simple victims of VE and objects to target and recruit, young people are also actors in their own right.

To support this perspective on youth in the context of PVE, CSOs have developed specific programming to bolster their dignity and participation, for example through the implementation of UNSCR 2250. This resolution promotes "participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, disengagement, and reintegration" as pillars to acknowledge young people's positive contributions to peace and security [8]. CSPPS and its members are also advocating for the YPS agenda at regional levels. In recent years, for instance, CSPPS has spearheaded studies and events around the role of PVE and the implementation of UNSCR 2250, developing recommendations for policy-makers, government, and the international community to encourage the involvement of civil society in this context. Supporting youth as positive agents of peace is essential to developing a prevention narrative that encompasses relevant stakeholders and concerns.

One CSO in the DRC, for instance, implements the following activities to return agency to young people and address the factors that can lead them to extremism:

- Involve youth in inter-community dialogues.
- Ensure youth participation in security sector reform.
- Integrate youth in neighborhood forums to participate in problem-solving in their own contexts.
- Teach good practices to young people involved in promoting sustainable peace.
- Teach the promotion of human rights.

These informational and educational programmes are critical to move beyond a negative perception of youth as idle and easily recruited into VE groups. Indeed, prevention must include concerns around dignity, employment, and participation. Supporting these values of prevention will help avoid the securitisation of the YPS agenda and will contribute to rebuilding the relationship between state and society. This relationship is in dire need of a renewed perspective, one that takes into account the youth and their particular needs in order to re-establish a social contract that protects and prevents root causes of extremism.

Case Study
Advancing the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda in Cameroon

Association Rayons de Soleil, Cameroon

Our eight respondents from Cameroon shed light on a particular aspect of PVE – namely, the perception of women as victims of extremism and as agents for peace. CSOs in Cameroon highlighted the particular challenges women face and how they have been included – or not – in addressing issues of VE at local and national levels.

The security landscape in Cameroon has greatly evolved since 2014. Around that time Boko Haram, spilling over from Nigeria, started to take root in the extreme North of Cameroon, exploiting pre-existing conditions favourable to VE [9].

"Empowerment of community members will undoubtedly contribute to improving the respect of citizens' fundamental rights both qualitatively and quantitatively."

[HURDA | Cameroon]

In addition to violence from Boko Haram, Cameroon faces several other conflicts, spanning localised insurgencies in the Southwest and Northwest regions, unrest stemming from the Central African Republic, as well as the Anglophone Crisis, with the "Ambazonian" extremist group, the Amba Boys [10]. Government response to these multiple conflicts has varied, though it initially focused on offensive military operations and security collaboration with neighbouring countries [11].

After finding these operations have not effectively diminished incidences of VE, international organisations like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) or various foreign ministries have partnered with civil society on the ground to address these threats through community resilience and capacity-building, rather than securitised CT [12]. Indeed, one report from Cameroon denounces that in recent years, the multiplication of military responses represents an increased focus on security which is not adapted to human, geographic, or strategic constraints [13]. This has prompted local civil society to warn against military operations that overshadow other types of responses promoted by humanitarian and development organisations [14]. This demonstrates the limits of traditional CT and the need for local and international support of peacebuilding actors- including local CSOs- in their prevention activities.

This idea is complemented by many of our survey respondents, who note that capacity-building improves organisational, operational, and professional interventions among local organisations while also reinforcing collaboration between community members. Such responses are perceived as effective engagements to address root causes of PVE, and are key to any prevention efforts.

A critical aspect of PVE is also addressing the difference in the impacts of root causes depending on the population. For instance, risk factors like poverty or the COVID-19 pandemic affect women differently than the rest of the population. As described in several recent reports, gender-based violence (GBV) greatly increased throughout the COVID-19 pandemic [15]. One year after the outbreak of COVID-19, civil society still notes GBV as a major concern, exposing women to even more vulnerability. Women are at higher risk of forcible recruitment into Boko Haram or separatist groups, where they are sexually enslaved and otherwise exploited and abused. Indeed, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is used by extremist groups as a weapon to break community bonds [16]. CSOs have responded to this gendered impact on several levels, by advocating for increased representation of women in key institutions of peace, and by protecting and empowering women on the ground to reduce the risk of GBV [17]. Improving the participation of women in peacebuilding and decision-making would also help return agency to women. To address the direct impacts of VE on women, some CSOs also provide "care, dialogue, and community involvement projects [...] which serve as direct and safe contact for receiving social support and gender-based violence services [18]."

Local peacebuilders also elaborate training programmes to empower women and encourage them to be active participants in PVE. One CSPPS member, for instance, provides training for women in the far North of Cameroon to educate them on security issues and conflict moderation within their communities. CSOs' critical role is made clear in this aspect of PVE, which highlights the need for a holistic approach to prevention that focuses on dialogue and inclusive participation. This response ties in with the important topic of social cohesion in general.

> "Women perceive themselves as marginalised and not involved in solving their own problems."
>
> [ALCODESA | Cameroon]

In this way, the work of PVE is grounded both at local levels, through CSOs' efforts on the ground, and international levels, through the development of international, interlinked objectives. CSOs' work in this context, for example, promotes the implementation of UNSCR 1325, which "reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security [19]." Advancing gender equality and the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda is also one of the thematic priorities of the IDPS Peace Vision [20]. The PVE and WPS agendas are therefore linked at the local level and mutually support each other. Moreover, by supporting local CSOs and by amplifying their voices to international stakeholders, CSPPS acts as a critical bridge in this context. As a Platform, therefore, we strongly advocate for awareness of the gendered aspects of violent extremism and for the inclusion of women in its prevention.

Any potential follow-up related to PVE can and should legitimately take into account gender dimensions to halt the spread of violent trends. This is especially the case at the local level, with CSOs clearly tying in the WPS agenda to their work in prevention and de-escalation. Our respondents, even beyond Cameroon, all noted that women were the primary victims of VE. But they can also be actors in its prevention. Through activities centred on dialogue, social cohesion, and community resilience, CSOs are including women in local responses to become their own agents.

Conclusion

PVE is a crucial topic for local peace actors, governments, and international stakeholders alike. Given the limitations of traditional CT, CSPPS emphasises the role of civil society in preventing trends before they erupt into violence. By steering the discourse away from unsuccessful securitised approaches, we focus on those that act at earlier stages through enhancing dialogue, bolstering social cohesion, and reinforcing community resilience. These approaches should be regarded as useful factors in preventing tensions from sliding into the realm of radicalisation and extremism, which then necessitate a different response. The central premise emanating from this report is therefore a call to steer away from overly securitised measures and support earlier action in response to early warning signs. This is particularly necessary considering failed securitised approaches and needs to address grievances in an adequate and timely manner. As highlighted, CSOs work towards PVE directly and indirectly, by promoting social cohesion, dialogue, and inclusivity. CSOs are key to building fair and just societies to undermine the causes of violent extremism, and their role should be recognised both at national and international levels.

Adequate responses to identified trends can assist CSOs in addressing issues before they escalate, but also in assessing government methods before they slip towards human rights violations. These activities also directly support the YPS and WPS agenda, which attract international backing and programming. As a constituent of the IDPS, CSPPS asserts the need to understand and respond to negative cycles and dimensions that attract people to VE. Therefore, prevention discourse should reclaim cooperation at all levels. Inclusive participatory processes and prevention via political dialogue are significant topics to explore in this regard. The global CSPPS platform is also a natural player in linking local action on dialogue processes to efforts at the international level. This helps to secure and bolster multi-level support to address the need for such a recalibrated approach. As a stakeholder in the peace and security nexus, the Platform acknowledges the complexity of peace and conflict and recognises the need for a holistic approach to promote more peaceful, just and inclusive societies. Civil society actors are best placed to encourage this cooperation, foster resilience, and build social cohesion that connects communities rather than insulates them.

Recommendations

As a global, member-led network, CSPPS seeks to strengthen its actions by integrating the recommendations raised by our members. In order to respond to our common concerns and present new ways to think about prevention before violence even emerges, CSPPS makes the following recommendations:

Match early warning mechanisms to corresponding early responses.

Local CSOs are in a unique position to identify trends in extremism and develop early warning mechanisms. Governments should support and work with these actors to ensure corresponding early responses that are not militarised. In this way, national authorities can leverage the local knowledge of peacebuilders while avoiding the harmful impacts of securitised CT approaches.

Exchange best practices and lessons learned.

It is critical to continue providing fora, like the Just Future consortium, that highlight common regional issues and propose solutions. These events represent the opportunity to bridge the divide between politicians, academia, civil society, and others, as well as to promote the exchange of knowledge and best practices for participants to implement in their own contexts. CSPPS is a natural player and facilitator of such processes, and should continue its role there.

Association Floraison, Togo

Develop more inclusive programming.

To assess tendencies on the ground and prevent their aggravation, more attention needs to be given to specific needs of marginalised populations. Programming at all levels must take note of exacerbating factors like environmental changes or global health crises. Communities most affected by these threats, as well as marginalised populations, must be actively engaged and consulted in any programme design that aims to address their needs and remedy concerns before trends lead to radicalisation and violent extremism. In the same way, Additionally, the gender dimension can no longer be ignored when developing such responses.

Promote prevention approaches over counterterrorist operations.

Relevant stakeholders must move away from repressive CT measures or, at the very least, ensure that human rights are upheld in these interventions and that prevention measures developed with civil society are also implemented. This can be achieved in several ways, by promoting transparency and accountability in military operations, or by shifting more funding away from military responses towards local CSOs. The 2018 Lake Chad Regional Stabilisation Strategy, for instance, specifically includes plans to build community resilience and capacity, demonstrating both the importance of collaborative, regional solutions as well as the value of CSOs' activities in this domain [21].

Uphold civic space.

The question of trust is critical in addressing the fragmentation of national cohesion and the breakdown of a functioning social contract. Governments must continue to establish clear and open channels of communication to develop this trust with their citizens. In the same vein, trust between different communities must be developed and consolidated. CSOs have a significant role to play here in creating and advocating for conducive dialogue. Greater acknowledgment of the role of local civil society actors in the PVE domain therefore needs to be accompanied by support in upholding and expanding necessary civic space for them to operate in, and by providing them with the means to act.

Association Floraison, Togo

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About CSPPS

The Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS) is a global network of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) supporting peacebuilding efforts in fragile and conflict-affected settings, jointly striving for inclusive societies and sustainable peace.

Cordaid, as part of its commitment to addressing fragility, hosts the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding. The Secretariat is managed and coordinated by our senior strategist, Peter van Sluijs.

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