Virtual Global Community of Practice:
Preventing Violent Extremism during and post COVID
2 July 2020

In 2020, GCERF introduced a Virtual P/CVE Global Community of Practice series, as a response to the COVID-19 situation. By pioneering a virtual approach to P/CVE, the fund is becoming a thought-leader on the intersection between the pandemic and security and most importantly, is continuing to build the capacity of grantees.

These Community of Practice (CoP) webinars provide a platform to share experiences and exchange ideas globally, promote a sense of community among GCERF grantees and PVE partners worldwide, and enhance PVE knowledge during the pandemic to inform activities after. The webinars are organised every two months and include a diverse group of participants: GCERF grantees from around the world (local civil society organisations), representatives of both partner country and donor governments, members of the GCERF Independent Review Panel and Board members.

The first such CoP, "Preventing Violent Extremism during and post COVID-19: Foresight Exercise," took place on 2 July 2020 bringing together 89 participants from civil society organisations, donors, government representatives, and PVE stakeholders. In preparing the event, GCERF surveyed 30 civil society organisations from Bangladesh, Kenya, Kosovo, Mali, Nigeria, the Philippines and Tunisia to better understand the future of PVE, after COVID-19. The main objectives of the discussion were to give a voice to civil society and hear about important PVE work local organisations are doing on ground, discuss emerging trends in violent extremism and share experiences in adapting activities during the pandemic.

GCERF structured discussion around survey results responding to five key questions:

1. **In your view, how does COVID-19 affect terrorism and violent extremism in the next six months in the communities where you work?**

COVID-19 had an immediate effect on communities. Recruitment by violent extremist and terrorist groups online and offline is increasing. At the same time, there is reduced resilience among individuals and communities because of the lack of employment and economic prospects. Reduced social cohesion, (e.g. increased inter- and intra-communal violence, including sexual and gender-based violence), as well as a decreased sense of purpose (e.g. negatively affected mental wellbeing) and a mass loss of livelihoods have increased

vulnerability to recruitment by violent extremist (VE) groups. Rising grievances against governments due to the economic impact of preventative COVID-19 measures are also fuelling violent extremist narratives worldwide.

The work of GCERF grantees with communities is especially critical in this moment. In Kenya, for example, one grantee worked with Muslim and Hindu religious leaders to help sensitise communities. They created a document using scriptures to demystify the illness and strengthen adherence to social distancing, handwashing and other government guidelines. The document also emphasised the need to avoid stigmatising those who had recovered from COVID-19.

2. What do you think the effect may be on terrorism and violent extremism in two years from now in the country where you are working?

There are several long-term concerns, including erosion of trust between civil society and governments and national services. Once trust is eroded, it is difficult to recover and mistrust can be exploited by VE groups.

Similarly, violent extremist groups may take advantage of the economic vulnerability of the community to promote their ideologies. Violent extremist groups may accelerate recruitment by offering alternative sources of income to poor and unemployed youth.

Participants also reported an increased marginalisation of minorities and religious communities. Such divisions pose longer term consequences for preventing violent extremism.

Another concern is linked to a future COVID-19 vaccine. The main question is how the PVE community can be sure that, once vaccine is available, it will be accepted by local communities.

3. Do you see any emerging new trends of violent extremist and terrorist groups in your country?

Overall, GCERF grantees reported increased physical insecurity, banditry, robbery and lone-wolf attackers, as well as heightened religious sensitivity and nationalism.

One of the most alarming points came from Kenya and Mali, where new violent extremist groups are being formed, specifically around COVID-19. In Mali, for example, instrumentalisation of socio-political grievances has contributed to an expansion of violent

extremism in Northern Mali and Central Mali and new local groups are forming on the basis of very specific local dynamics, for instance in Mopti and Koulikoro.

In other locations, the position of current VE groups has been strengthened by COVID-19. Violent extremist groups are filling the gap in service and security provision in non-government controlled areas in Kenya, for example, and offering water and food. This risks building credibility for violent extremist groups in communities seeking support.

Another consequence has been the erosion of social cohesion among members of different faiths. This is emerging from myths being circulated to cause confusion and create fear among vulnerable groups. Religious leaders must work together to avoid the spread of religious intolerance in the community.

In the Philippines, the recruitment narrative for violent extremists is changing. Violent extremists now refer to the pandemic as a "divine" intervention and blame the government for restricting movement.

4. Do you think that some of the drivers of VE have changed as a result of COVID-19 related restrictions and effects?

Most drivers remain the same but have became exacerbated by new socio-economic challenges, such as increasing poverty and unemployment rates, human right abuses, especially when courts and judicial institutions are closed due to lockdown. These and other factors such as decreased mental health, reduced social bonding and increased suspicion of government and other communities further complicate the situation. It is vital to continue funding work with local communities when COVID-19 is over, as violent groups move to exploit reduced community resilience.

Some participants pointed out alarming new drivers, including a growing sense of tolerance in certain communities to the presence of violent extremism groups. Another is the mass use of the internet without being digitally literate or possessing the critical thinking skills to discern fact from myth.

At the same time, the current situation poses an opportunity to pause and reflect on conditions conducive to P/CVE. There is an increased recognition that poverty, climate change and global health threats are drivers of violent extremism, and this is something that is worthy of further exploration.

5. **Do you think that there are some positive effects of COVID-19 that you could build on in future PVE work?**

There is a feeling that the situation has required genuine multi-stakeholder engagement, which paves the way for a more holistic approach to preventing violent extremism in the future. In some locations, there has been an increased willingness to coordinate the work of civil society and state institutions working in P/CVE. In Kenya, for example, one of GCERF grantee, working with the national and county governments, formed a coordination mechanism that brought together the private sector, government and CSOs to have a coordinated response to COVID-19. It resulted in integrated PVE messaging in all activities and led to better results.

Innovative PVE programming, including discovery of new online tools and building new networks for COVID-19 awareness raising, has increased and will be used for future PVE programming. Many communities also felt there is a solidarity around pandemic and this is something that can be translated into PVE. One more important trend is growth of youth volunteerism around Covid-19 – mobilising youth is another example of effectively preventing violent extremism.

Raised during the discussion included:

The Impact of Covid-19 on Education: There is a risk that restricted access to education now will have an impact on unemployment and poverty in the future. To counter this, GCERF partner and Board member institution, the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, has launched an online platform, taking into consideration asymmetry and quality of education provision. Not all young people have fast internet and adequate learning spaces so inequalities and gaps rise as a result of that. More details on this work is here: **[Generation Global Ultimate Dialogue Adventure](#)**.

Through this Community of Practice, GCERF hopes that this type of engagement between government and civil society, detailing the situation on the ground, serves to remind the international community of the urgent need to pay attention to the impact of COVID-19 on preventing violent extremism.