

## PVE best practices:

### A whole-of-society approach to rehabilitation and reintegration

*"We were given a second chance to start a new life together with the kids"*

*– Albanian mother who recently returned from the Al Hol camp in Syria*

A multi-stakeholder approach is at the core of the whole-of-society approach adopted by the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF) for the rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) of people returning from conflicts. GCERF-funded initiatives are led by partners at the local level who work with stakeholders at the national, regional, and international levels to improve R&R and Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE).



*"With the support of GCERF, Albania has provided tailor made interventions where the presence of radicalisation is higher than elsewhere." H.E. Mr Bledi Çuçi, Minister of Interior of the Republic of Albania*

On 15 June 2022, the Government of Albania, the European Union, and GCERF co-organised a high-level event promoting international support for R&R, sharing lessons learned, and providing recommendations for policy makers and donors.

### The global challenge of R&R of people returning from foreign conflicts



*"Receiving communities need to be involved. They can't feel like they are being left behind" – Mr Amadou Sall, Head of the Youth, Gender and Countering Violent Extremism Division, G5 Sahel, Nouakchott*

Many violent extremist groups and networks make use of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs). Over 40,000 individuals from 120 countries have travelled to Syria

and Iraq as FTFs.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, other VE groups such as Boko Haram and far-right extremist networks have recruited people regionally and internationally to support their cause. While acknowledging differences of contexts, panellists identified some key approaches in tackling the return and reintegration of former VE fighters:

- **Strategic communication on R&R** ensures that returning FTFs (RFTFs) and the communities to which they may return are informed on the availability of government-sponsored programmes; facilitating the re-socialisation of returnees into their communities.
- **Engaging Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and other community members** such as educational staff and community leaders builds community agency. Empowering CSOs and the community are key to a whole-of-society approach which can be sustained beyond the duration of international programmes.
- **Tailor-made interventions** ensure the individual needs of returnees are met, which can include trauma processing, medical support, and livelihood support, all of which need to be gender mainstreamed. It is equally important to include initiatives with the wider community to ensure no one is left behind and that vulnerable people across the country are supported.
- **Flexible programming** is required to adapt to the evolving nature of violent extremism. Changing contexts and shifts in threats from, for example, religious extremism to ethno-political extremist violence, also demonstrate the need to work with the wider community on different types of extremism.

### Lessons learned from GCERF in the Western Balkans



Both successes *and* failures should be shared to learn from each other nationally, regionally, and internationally. *"Behind every statistic there is a story. Behind every story there is a challenge that we face on the frontline"* – Ms Rebeka Qena, Programme Manager Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programme in Kosovo; Community Development Fund (CDF)

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<sup>1</sup> UNODC. "Foreign Terrorist Fighters". unodc.org

Over 500 people have returned to the Western Balkans from Syria and Iraq. GCERF-funded CSOs in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia have worked together with government and international partners on the R&R of returnees and PVE in the communities. Panellists shared key lessons learned from the region's multi-stakeholder approach:

- **Interdisciplinary interventions** including legal, medical, psychological, social, and economic support requires the involvement of different institutions and actors. This includes central and local government institutions, but also CSOs and community members.
- **PVE should continue to be a priority** in order to address vulnerabilities in the communities. Returnees from conflicts are not the sole source of the VE threats. Push and pull factors still need to be addressed to further prevent radicalisation.
- **Regional information sharing** is crucial to avoid reinventing the wheel or making the same mistakes. Both best practices and failures should be shared to learn regionally and internationally.
- **Decentralisation of the R&R process** is essential for sustainability. Local government actors, CSOs, and community members should have a role in PVE and R&R and be empowered in that role, to ensure long term PVE. Capacity building for these local actors is crucial to ensure an effective continuation of PVE and R&R.

### Communities as a central element of successful R&R



"We need to work parallelly on PVE and R&R. There is no luxury to work on one at the time." – Ms Valdete Idrizi, Director of Culture and Youth, Office of the Mayor of Mitrovica, Kosovo

Putting communities at the core of R&R and PVE helps ensure community agency of the process. CSOs and local practitioners such as social workers, psychologists, teachers, and other community leaders are uniquely equipped to address context specific vulnerabilities and concerns. Their credibility and trust in their communities makes them a key partner in P/CVE and R&R. Key considerations to enhance community

engagement are:

- Community-based initiatives and the **role of CSOs should be embedded in national strategies** and action plans to ensure alignment, coordination, and meaningful contributions of communities to PVE and R&R.
- **Training local service providers** is key to long-term support for returnees and communities. Local actors are key to understanding what drives people to VE in their local communities, yet they may be reluctant in their support if they do not feel capacitated to tackle R&R and PVE.
- **The local political context should inform initiatives.** Programming in multi-ethnic environments can be challenging and working with local community actors that have the trust and ability to include people from different ethnicities, languages, and cultures is crucial to encourage tolerance and dialogue.
- **Local media plays a role in the perception** of R&R and PVE-related topics. Initiatives should build their capacity to develop conflict sensitive content and avoid inciting hate speech or further stigmatisation of a particular group.

### Far right and ethno-nationalist extremism

GCERF and its partners identified an increasing threat of far-right extremism (FRE) and ethno-nationalist extremism in the Western Balkans. GCERF partners discussed some of their work to date including research and inter-ethnic resilience building, in particular with youth. Some of the key challenges identified were:



*"When social cohesion is lower, sympathies for violence are higher" – Ms Nejra Veljan, Project Manager, the Atlantic Initiative, Sarajevo*

- The Western Balkan's **post conflict context** and unresolved legacies of war cause continued inter-ethnic tension. While FRE in other regions could lead to VE incidents, in the Western Balkans it could lead to large scale violence or even war.
- VE groups are influenced by **global events, and transnational interconnectivity** of VE groups mean that threats of VE groups in one country in the Western Balkans can affect the region and even have global consequences.
- **Online hate speech and misinformation fuels offline segregation.** The presence of VE groups online focuses on misinformation of what happens offline.

On the other hand, GCERF partners highlighted opportunities to address FRE and ethno-nationalist extremism:

- **Fostering social cohesion and an inclusive sense of belonging.** When social cohesion is lower, sympathy for violence is higher. Encouraging tolerance and cohesion among different ethnic and religious groups is crucial in lowering people's propensity to violence.
- **Make PVE a priority** to address structural push and pull factors that could lead to radicalisation to far-right, ethno-nationalist, or religious extremism. Structural drivers such as lack of opportunities in education and employment still need to be addressed.
- **Working with media** on conflict sensitive reporting to avoid inciting hate speech and spreading misinformation. Media can also support a better understanding of the R&R and PVE process.