GCERF
Preventing Violent Extremism and Terrorism

PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM

A CIVIL SOCIETY'S GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

Violent extremism remains one of the most complex and pressing challenges facing communities, governments, civil society organisations (CSOs) and the global society as a whole. While its manifestations differ across regions, its impact is consistently destabilising. Violent extremism undermines peace, security, and development. Time has made a lesson clear: addressing this challenge requires more than security-based approaches alone. It needs inclusive, context-sensitive, and evidence-informed strategies that empower communities to understand, prevent radicalisation and violence As the threat persists and, in some regions, grows, and resources to fund preventive approaches become limited, there is an increasing need for the most effective strategies to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE) and terrorism.

This training manual is part of the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund's (GCERF) wider effort to promote knowledge in PVE at a global level. This endeavour materialises through the Global Action Platform (GAP). The GAP was created by GCERF to foster knowledge and experience sharing among past and present grantees, serving as a hub for collaboration, enabling local organisations to strengthen their capacity and enhance their PVE programming. As part of this effort, this manual and its subsequent training materials have been designed to to strengthen the design, implementation, and evaluation of P/CVE programmes. GCERF collaborates with local partners to build community resilience and address the drivers of radicalisation. Civil society actors are often at the forefront of prevention, working closely with communities to understand local dynamics and foster trust, thereby enhancing resilience.

The manual brings together key concepts, analytical models, and practical approaches that have emerged from research, field practice, and policy developments in P/CVE. It begins by clarifying the concepts of violent extremism and terrorism. It then examines the importance of evidence-based programming. The manual introduces major drivers of violent extremism and models for understanding radicalisation. It also focuses on P/CVE strategies and interventions, including resilience-building, deradicalisation, and reintegration. The manual also addresses the rapidly evolving digital landscape, exploring how online spaces and artificial intelligence shape both radicalisation processes and prevention efforts. Finally, it outlines key principles in P/CVE that make the programming responsible, accountable and sustainable.

This manual is intended as both a learning resource and a practical tool. Each section includes discussion cases to encourage critical thinking and application to real-world contexts. The aim is not to provide a one-size-fits-all model, but to equip practitioners with a solid foundation for analysing complex situations, designing effective interventions, and working collaboratively with communities and institutions.

Ultimately, P/CVE is not solely about countering threats; it is about building inclusive, just, and resilient societies where violence holds less appeal and peaceful alternatives and viable CSOs play a crucial role in this effort, and GCERF is committed to supporting their capacity to do so.

1.VIOLENT EXTREMISM: WHAT IS IN A NAME

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Define violent extremism and terrorism clearly.
- Explain how violent extremism and terrorism are related but distinct concepts.
- Analyse the implications of different definitions for programming and community engagement.

Clarity in terminology is not just a matter of semantics; at least not when it comes to preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE). Rather, it forms the foundation for effective and responsible practice. The words we choose (e.g., conflict, insurgency, violent extremism, or terrorism) carry political weight, shape programme priorities, and influence how communities perceive our work. Confusing or misusing concepts can easily result in poorly designed interventions, strained relationships with governments, or stigmatisation of the very communities we aim to support. Therefore, we will begin by attempting to define the concept of violent extremism, its relationship, and distinct characteristics in relation to terrorism. Recognising that we can hardly find a consensual definition for such sensitive terms, the aim here is to establish parameters that provide a basis for further discussions.

1.1 WHAT IS VIOLENT EXTREMISM?

Violent extremism combines two words, with "violent" describing a particular form of "extremism". In other words, "extremism" is the key term. Extremism, derived from "extreme", can be defined as holding rigid, absolute, and uncompromising political, religious, or ideological views outside what most in a given society accept as legitimate. Emphasis should be on "most" and "given society".

Extremism can be defined as holding rigid, absolute, and uncompromising political, religious, or ideological views outside what most in society accept as legitimate.

In short, extremism is a relative concept that varies with context. However, ideas that breach human rights and dignity are generally more widely unacceptable and illegitimate. For example, few would accept that one group forces others to follow a specific religion, as this infringes on the freedom of choice and religion.

Although, as we will see later, one path to violent extremism is radicalisation, extremism involves more than just radical ideas. While radicalism emphasises the depth of change (root-level transformation), extremism relates to the inflexibility of views (i.e., intolerance towards different or opposing perspectives). Of course, these differences are not always clear-cut. For example, many movements in history, such as anti-colonial struggles, the fight for women's suffrage, or the civil rights movement, were once labelled as "extreme" or "radical."

Extremism alone does not necessarily involve violence. Someone may hold extreme political or religious beliefs but pursue them through peaceful means, such as activism, writing, or protests. An action is considered violence if a person or group intentionally does something that causes another person to die, get hurt, or suffer against his or her own will.

Violence is when a person or group intentionally does something that causes another person to die, get hurt, or suffer against his or her own will.

Violence can take many forms, including physical aggression, sexual assault, psychological abuse, and structural or systemic oppression. It can occur in interpersonal, social, political, or institutional contexts. Violence is not limited to direct acts; it also includes indirect forms, such as intimidation, neglect, or deprivation, that threaten the safety, dignity, or well-being of individuals or communities.

Just as not all extremism leads to violence, violence itself is not always caused by extreme beliefs. People and groups resort to violence for various reasons, such as competing over resources, seeking revenge for perceived injustices, criminal profit, or local power conflicts. For instance, in some cases of communal violence, clashes between herders and farmers may be triggered by disputes over land and water instead of extremist ideologies. Likewise, urban gangs may use violence to defend territory or control illicit markets, not because they hold extreme beliefs.

Given the above, **violent extremism can be defined as deliberately using or justifying actions that cause another person to die, be injured, or suffer against their will, in pursuit of rigid, absolute, and uncompromising political, religious, or ideological beliefs outside what most people in a society consider legitimate.**

Violent extremism thrives on rigid "us versus them" thinking. It often portrays society as irreparably divided between believers versus infidels, patriots versus traitors, one ethnic group against another. Violent extremism often dehumanises those who have different worldviews, rejects compromise, pluralism, and peaceful coexistence.

1.2 WHAT IS TERRORISM?

Terrorism is best understood as a tactic or method of violence. It is the deliberate use of violence, often targeting civilians or non-combatants, with the intention of instilling fear and sending a political or ideological message.

It is the ability to instil fear (or terror) that makes terrorism so powerful and harmful. A single terrorist attack is typically designed not just to harm the immediate victims but to communicate something to a much wider audience. When a bomb explodes in a marketplace, the target is not only the people present in that space. It is the entire community that comes to see markets as unsafe, the government whose credibility is undermined, or the international media whose coverage amplifies the attackers' message. Terrorism thus operates as "theatre": it is violence performed for an audience, intended to spread fear, insecurity, and political pressure far beyond the point of attack.

For example, the bombing of commuter trains in Madrid in 2004 killed nearly 200 people, but its real impact was the shockwaves it sent through Spanish society. The attack influenced national elections and reshaped Spain's foreign policy. Similarly, when Boko Haram kidnaps schoolgirls in Nigeria, the act is not only about those children. It is a message to the Nigerian state, to local communities, and to the world about the group's defiance and its power to terrorise.

Defining terrorism, however, has always been politically contentious. Governments and international bodies have produced dozens of definitions, but no universally accepted one exists. Some governments apply the label selectively, branding opponents as "terrorists" while avoiding the term for allied groups that commit similar acts. In some contexts, what one community perceives as terrorism, another may view as resistance or liberation. The old saying "one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter" is often invoked, though it oversimplifies complex dynamics.

1.3 HOW VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM RELATE?

Violent extremism and terrorism are closely related, but they are not synonymous. Violent extremism is the broader phenomenon. Terrorism, by contrast, is one particular tactic that violent extremists may choose to employ.

Not all violent extremists carry out terrorist attacks. Some may focus on violent recruitment, running paramilitary training camps, or engaging in localised clashes that do not fit the classic definition of terrorism. Others may remain in the realm of rhetoric and propaganda, encouraging others to commit violence while not engaging themselves directly. Similarly, not all acts of terrorism are rooted in extremism; some involve violence for acceptable ideologies.

For CSOs working in P/CVE, the distinction between violent extremism and terrorism can shape the very strategies and tools available to practitioners. If all violent extremism is automatically labelled as terrorism, interventions are likely to become securitised. Governments may respond with heavy-handed policing, surveillance, or military campaigns. While sometimes necessary to address immediate threats, these approaches can alienate communities, exacerbate existing grievances, and narrow civic space. CSOs that are associated with such approaches may lose trust.

By contrast, recognising violent extremism as a broader social and ideological phenomenon opens up space for preventive, community-based work. CSOs can design programmes that focus on reducing vulnerabilities long before terrorism occurs. There is also an ethical dimension. Using the label "terrorism" too broadly can stigmatise entire communities. For example, after the 9/11 attacks, many Muslim communities around the world were treated with suspicion, even though the vast majority rejected violence.

Finally, distinguishing between the two concepts helps with monitoring and evaluation. A P/CVE programme aimed at reducing violent extremism may not be able to prove that "terrorism has ended," since that outcome is influenced by many external factors, including state security operations. However, it can measure progress in terms of reduced community polarisation, increased trust between youth and institutions, or greater resilience against extremist narratives. These are meaningful indicators that fall within the reach of CSO interventions.

CASE FOR DISCUSSION 1

In a city facing high youth unemployment, a student movement called New Dawn emerges. Its members demand radical political reforms and openly criticise the government. They stage protests, sometimes using provocative language. Over time, a small group within New Dawn begins to argue that real change can only come through force. They post messages online praising past uprisings and hinting at attacks on government buildings. However, no violence has yet occurred.

Discussion:

1. At this stage, are the students extremists, violent extremists, or radical activists?
2. Which specific indicators would suggest a shift towards violent extremism?
3. How should CSOs approach such a group without criminalising dissent or overlooking genuine risks?

CASE FOR DISCUSSION 2

A respected local religious leader regularly preaches that "true believers belong to God's kingdom, not to earthly governments." He urges his followers to withdraw from state institutions, including refraining from voting in national or local elections, refusing to display or respect state symbols such as flags and national anthems, and discouraging participation in civic activities organised by government bodies.

He frames this as a spiritual duty, not a call to violence. His congregation grows rapidly, attracting people who feel alienated from politics. Some community members view this as a harmless religious expression, while others fear it could weaken national cohesion or pave the way for more radical forms of rejection of state authority.

Discussion:

• At what point does ideological or religious non-participation in state structures become a concern for violent extremism prevention — and how should civil society respond?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

• There is no universally accepted definition of violent extremism. However, most definitions imply that violent extremism involves the use or justification of harmful methods to pursue absolute, intolerant, and illegitimate ideas.

• Just as not all extremism leads to violence, violence itself is not always caused by extreme beliefs.

• Terrorism is a tactic, not an ideology. It is one of several possible methods used by violent extremists, designed to instil fear and achieve political or ideological goals.

• Language matters. Mislabelling dissent or ordinary crime as terrorism or violent extremism can stigmatise communities and undermine trust. Precision in terminology helps CSOs maintain credibility and effectiveness.

2. EVIDENCE-BASED PROGRAMMING

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Understand the risks of oversimplified narratives about violent extremism.
- Explain why pathways to radicalisation are more useful than profiles.
- Distinguish between correlation and causation when analysing drivers of extremism.
- Apply evidence-based approaches to designing P/CVE programmes.

When communities face violent extremism, there is often a natural tendency to seek a single, clear cause. Policymakers, media, and sometimes even practitioners search for simple explanations. However, reality is much more complex. People engage in violent extremism for multiple, overlapping reasons, influenced by their environment, personal experiences, and the opportunities or constraints they encounter.

Thinking carefully about the drivers of violent extremism, therefore, requires a posture of humility, curiosity, and rigour. We must learn, for instance, to resist stereotypes, avoid mistaking correlation for causation, and embrace the reality that violent extremism is best understood as the outcome of multiple, interacting pathways. This section explores these themes in detail, offering insights for how to develop a more evidence-based understanding of violent extremism and translate that understanding into responsible practice.

2.1 OVERSIMPLIFICATION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

One of the most common pitfalls in thinking about violent extremism is the allure of oversimplification. The pressures of policymaking, media reporting, and public debate all encourage the search for one single explanation. Poverty, ideology, or mental illness are frequently offered as neat answers. But the attraction of these claims lies less in their accuracy and more in their simplicity. They provide an easy story that satisfies a need for certainty in the face of a messy and troubling phenomenon.

In practice, however, such claims quickly fall apart under scrutiny. Poverty, for example, is often assumed to be the primary driver of extremism. While economic exclusion can certainly create vulnerability, the reality is that many violent extremists do not come from the poorest strata of society. Some are middle-class, well-educated, and relatively privileged. In some cases, education has even provided individuals with the tools to articulate grievances in ideological terms and to organise effectively. Reducing extremism to a problem of poverty risks misleading us into assuming that job creation schemes or vocational training alone will solve the problem.

Oversimplifications not only produce poor analysis; they also shape interventions in counterproductive ways. If violent extremism is seen as simply the product of poverty, then programmes may ignore questions of governance, identity, or political legitimacy.

If it is viewed as inherent to a particular faith or ethnic group, then entire communities may be stigmatised, fuelling resentment and mistrust. CSOs must therefore cultivate a discipline of resisting simple answers and instead embracing complexity, however uncomfortable that may be.

2.2 PATHWAYS RATHER THAN PROFILES

Closely related to oversimplification is the danger of stereotyping. In many contexts, certain communities, faiths, or ethnic groups are routinely associated with violent extremism. Such associations can become self-reinforcing, shaping how civil society, security forces, and even donors design their interventions.

Stereotyping stigmatises innocent people, making them feel targeted rather than supported. Communities that perceive themselves as unfairly labelled may withdraw from engagement, undermining the trust on which prevention and resilience-building efforts depend. Stereotypes also obscure internal diversity. Within any community, there are individuals who resist extremist ideologies, who work actively for peace, and who foster resilience. When we view a community only through the lens of risk, we overlook opportunities to support and amplify these positive dynamics.

Moreover, decades of research have shown that no single set of demographic characteristics consistently predicts who will join extremist groups. Individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds, educational levels, and family situations can all be drawn into extremism. Efforts to create predictive profiles risk reinforcing stereotypes and diverting attention from more useful analysis.

Instead of looking for profiles, we should focus on pathways. Pathways describe the processes through which individuals come to adopt extremist beliefs and behaviours. These pathways vary widely; therefore, focusing on pathways encourages us to ask how and why individuals move toward violence, and equally how they move away from it. Understanding these processes provides a more actionable basis for designing interventions than attempting to identify a “type” of person at risk.

2.3 CORRELATION IS NOT CAUSATION

Another analytical challenge is the tendency to confuse correlation with causation. Research often highlights statistical associations between certain variables and violent extremism. While such findings are valuable, they must be interpreted with caution.

For instance, high unemployment may correlate with higher levels of extremist recruitment in some areas. But unemployment itself may not be the direct cause. What may matter more are the frustrations, humiliations, and sense of exclusion that can accompany joblessness. In other cases, unemployment may be largely irrelevant compared to other grievances. Treating unemployment as a causal driver risks investing heavily in job programmes without addressing the deeper issues of political exclusion or lack of belonging.

Similarly, research often shows a correlation between online consumption of extremist content and radicalisation.[1] Yet many people consume extremist materials without ever acting on them. Social media platforms may provide amplifiers and echo chambers, but they do not directly “cause” violence. The actual causal pathway may involve prior vulnerabilities, recruitment networks, or real-world grievances that make online content resonate.

[1] For example., Binder, J. F., & Kenyon, J. (2022). Terrorism and the internet: How dangerous is online radicalization?. Frontiers in psychology, 13, 997390.

The same is true for conflict exposure. Living in an area marked by violence may increase the likelihood of recruitment into extremist groups, but it does not determine outcomes. Many people exposed to conflict respond by seeking peace, migration, or reconciliation. Understanding why some individuals choose violence while others do not requires a deeper analysis of contextual and relational factors. We must therefore learn to treat correlations as signals rather than answers. Correlations can point to areas worth investigating, but they should never be assumed to establish causality.

In a nutshell, violent extremism defies easy explanations. It is shaped by multiple and interacting drivers that operate across different levels and vary across contexts. When we seek to prevent or counter violent extremism, we must therefore resist the temptations of oversimplification, stereotyping, and faulty causal claims. It is necessary to cultivate a discipline of careful analysis, humility, and engagement with communities as partners. In doing so, we can move beyond misleading narratives and toward interventions that genuinely address the drivers of violence while strengthening the resilience that already exists within societies.

2.4 TOWARDS EVIDENCE-BASED P/CVE

Evidence-based programming utilises the most current and reliable scientific knowledge to inform intervention decisions.Evidence-based programming, however, is not about eliminating uncertainty, nor is it a guarantee of success. Rather, it is a commitment to grounding decisions in the best available knowledge, testing assumptions against data, and fostering a culture of learning and adaptation.

In the context of P/CVE, where interventions can have profound social and political consequences, the case for evidence is especially compelling. Programmes that are poorly designed or inadequately evaluated risk wasting scarce resources, stigmatising communities, or even intensifying the very dynamics they seek to counter. By contrast, evidence-based approaches can target interventions more precisely, enhance accountability, and increase legitimacy in the eyes of both communities and funders.

In practical terms, evidence-based programming involves three interrelated commitments:

- First, programming begins with a clear and accurate diagnosis of the problem. This means avoiding broad generalisations such as “poverty causes extremism” or “ideology is the root driver” and instead basing interventions on data that reflect the realities of the specific context.

- Second, interventions are designed and implemented in light of what is known from previous research and evaluation about what works, what does not, and why.

- Finally, programs are accompanied by systems of monitoring and evaluation that generate new evidence, allowing for ongoing refinement and adaptation.

In fields such as public health and education, this approach has become standard. Medical treatments are rigorously tested before being widely applied; educational strategies are evaluated for their impact on learning outcomes. P/CVE is still a young field by comparison, but the logic is the same: without evidence, interventions risk being ineffective or counterproductive; with evidence, they have a stronger chance of making a measurable difference.

Despite its appeal, evidence-based programming in P/CVE faces significant obstacles. Measuring outcomes in this field is particularly challenging. In public health, the success of a vaccination campaign can be assessed by the reduction in infection rates. In education, the impact of a teaching method can be measured by the results of exams. But in P/CVE, the ultimate goal is often the absence of an event (e.g., a radicalisation that never occurs, a violent act that is never carried out). This makes impact difficult to capture. Practitioners must therefore rely on proxy indicators, such as changes in attitudes, levels of trust, or patterns of community resilience. While valuable, these proxies are imperfect and can be contested.

Data collection poses another challenge. Extremism is a sensitive subject. Individuals may be reluctant to disclose radical views, communities may fear stigmatisation, and governments may restrict access to information. Ethical considerations are also critical. Researchers and practitioners must balance the need for data with the imperative to protect participants' privacy and dignity and avoid inadvertently criminalising vulnerable individuals.
Context dependence is another major issue. Evidence generated in one country cannot simply be transplanted into another without careful adaptation. A programme that builds resilience in European cities may fail in regions affected by armed conflict. P/CVE practitioners must therefore navigate the tension between drawing on global evidence and tailoring interventions to local realities.

Finally, P/CVE is a deeply politicised field. Evidence does not exist in a vacuum. Governments and donors may favour programmes that align with their political priorities rather than those that are most effective. CSOs must often navigate these pressures while striving to maintain the integrity of an evidence-based approach.

CASE FOR DISCUSSION 1

In the town of Madori, a local CSO launches a football tournament to "keep youth away from extremist recruiters." The idea comes from community elders who believe "keeping youth busy with sports" is the best way to prevent radicalisation. The programme is popular and easy to implement. Later, a small research project reveals that the youth most vulnerable to extremist messaging are actually not the ones participating in sports; they are young men who feel politically excluded and distrustful of state authorities.

Discussion questions:

- Is the opinion of traditional authorities who have a deep knowledge of their communities a valid indicator of effectiveness in P/CVE work?
- How can CSOs respectfully question deeply held community beliefs without alienating supporters?
- How could this programme have been improved through simple evidence-gathering methods?

CASE FOR DISCUSSION 2

An international think tank publishes a study claiming that economic marginalisation is the primary driver of radicalisation in the country of Selvania. A local CSO is pressured by donors to align its programmes with these findings. However, the CSO's community consultations paint a more complex picture: some youths are radicalised despite having stable jobs; religious networks, local grievances, and peer influence also play key roles; and community leaders feel the study "doesn't understand our context." The CSO must decide whether to follow the donor's directive and design job-training programs, or advocate for a hybrid approach that integrates local insights, which may be harder to justify "scientifically."

Discussion Questions:

- How can CSOs balance external research with local lived realities?
- What makes some forms of evidence seem "more legitimate" than others?
- How can local knowledge be documented and presented in ways donors take seriously?
- What risks arise if CSOs follow external evidence blindly?

3.THE RISK FACTORS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND RADICALISATION

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify and categorise key political, identity-based, socioeconomic, and global drivers of violent extremism.
- Critically evaluate misconceptions and weakly supported drivers.
- Explain major radicalisation models, including the Two Pyramids model, the 3N model, and the Devoted Actor model.
- Apply these models to real-world case studies to better understand radicalisation pathways.

Understanding the drivers of violent extremism and radicalisation is an essential part of developing effective strategies to prevent and counter them. This section explores these radicalisation models and the main drivers of violent extremism, drawing on evidence of varying strength to provide a comprehensive overview.

3.1 THE RISK FACTORS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

While violent extremism manifests differently across contexts, research has identified a number of recurring political, social, economic, and identity-related factors that can contribute to its emergence. A widely used framework to identify the pressures that drive people away from mainstream society and the attractions that draw them into extremist groups is the push and pull model.

PUSH FACTORS	PULL FACTORS
Social marginalisation, isolation	Sense of belonging, social networks
Poor governance	Financial incentives
Perception that culture is under threat	Sense of purpose and a goal
Unemployment, economic disempowerment	Possibility of social status and gaining respect
Youth frustration	Personal appeal of preachers
Police harassment/profiling	Interpretation of religious teachings, sense of religious duty

Push factors are the negative conditions that increase vulnerability. They are the reasons why someone may feel excluded, alienated, or dissatisfied with their current circumstances. These can be structural or personal. Pull factors are the attractions that extremist groups use to draw people in. These are often presented as solutions to the frustrations created by push factors. For example, if someone feels powerless, a group may offer them a sense of status and agency. If someone feels excluded, the group may offer a sense of community and belonging. Pull factors can include material benefits such as money or protection, but they are just as often emotional or ideological. The table below illustrates some of the commonly cited push and pull factors.

In recent decades, significant research has been conducted on what drives people towards violent extremism[2]. Unsurprisingly, much remains unknown, many hypotheses are contested, and little consensus has been reached. Furthermore, some commonly cited factors lack strong empirical support. For example, assumptions that low literacy or religious schools (such as madrassas) are primary sources of radicalisation are not supported by the evidence. On the contrary, individuals with higher levels of religious education are less likely to be voluntarily recruited into violent extremist groups. Therefore, although religious places can become sites of radicalisation, like any social institution, their role has often been exaggerated in policy debates. Next, we will briefly discuss some of the most empirically tested drivers:

- ***Political grievances and government failures***

Political grievances and governance failures are frequently cited as significant drivers of violent extremism. When individuals or groups are systematically denied meaningful political participation, grievances can build, creating fertile ground for extremist groups to exploit. Authoritarian practices, electoral manipulation, and the absence of legitimate political channels often lead to frustration and distrust toward state institutions.

Although evidence on the direct causal link is mixed, studies show that political repression can act as a catalyst for anti-government violence in general, particularly when nonviolent avenues for change are blocked.[3] In some contexts, social or political groups seeking peaceful reform may face state repression, which pushes segments of these groups toward violent strategies. This dynamic has been observed in several historical insurgencies where initial peaceful mobilisations transformed into violent movements following state crackdowns.

Governance failures also contribute to violent extremism by undermining the state's legitimacy. When governments fail to deliver basic services (e.g., education, health care, and welfare), extremist organisations may step in to fill the gap. Groups that provide reliable services can gain local legitimacy, positioning themselves as alternative authorities.[4] Similarly, the failure of state security and justice institutions can create power vacuums that extremist actors exploit. Populations facing insecurity often accept any actor capable of providing stability, even if that actor uses coercive means. This pragmatic support for extremist groups demonstrates that violent extremism is often sustained not only by ideological conviction but also by material and governance considerations.

[2] For a comprehensive literature review see Vergani, M., Iqbal, M., Ilbahar, E., & Barton, G. (2020). The three Ps of radicalization: Push, pull and personal. A systematic scoping review of the scientific evidence about radicalization into violent extremism. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 43(10), 854-854.
[3] Bartusevičius, H., Van Leeuwen, F., & Petersen, M. B. (2023). Political repression motivates anti-government violence. Royal Society open science, 10(6), 221227.
[4] Nevertheless, legitimacy does not always translate into support. See Kluijver, R. (2025). Al Shabaab governance: illiberal modernization? Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2025.2512722

- ***Identity, social change, and discrimination***

Identity dynamics are among the most strongly supported drivers of violent extremism. Rapid social, economic, or cultural change can undermine traditional sources of identity, particularly for young people. In such contexts, extremist ideologies may offer a sense of belonging, purpose, and clarity. Young individuals grappling with identity crises may find radical movements appealing because they provide clear moral frameworks and a strong sense of community. Extremist groups often target youth populations precisely for this reason, offering them status and recognition that they may lack elsewhere.

Religious and ethnic identities can also be instrumentalised by extremist ideologues. When individuals perceive that their identity group is marginalised, discriminated against, or under threat, they may become more receptive to extremist narratives. Leaders who can frame their political goals in identity terms often mobilise significant support by appealing to deeply held loyalties. Empirical evidence strongly supports the idea that marginalisation of identity groups along ethnic or religious lines increases the risk of radicalisation. Shared experiences of discrimination and exclusion can foster collective grievances that extremists exploit for recruitment and mobilisation.

Moreover, ideas of masculinity can contribute to violent extremism by shaping how men interpret and respond to feelings of marginalisation, insecurity, and social change.[5] Many extremist movements construct idealised notions of "real men" — strong, dominant, and willing to use violence to defend honour, faith, or nation. When men experience a perceived loss of power or relevance ("crisis of masculinity"), extremist ideologies can appear to offer a path to reclaim status, belonging, and authority. Violent extremism often functions as a means for men to restore a threatened masculine identity. Extremist groups use gendered narratives that glorify aggression, heroism, and sacrifice, positioning violence as a legitimate expression of manhood. These gendered appeals are powerful recruitment tools particularly for men who feel emasculated by unemployment, political instability, or shifting gender norms.

- ***Socioeconomic factors and opportunity structures***

Socioeconomic conditions are often assumed to be key drivers of extremism, but the evidence is more nuanced. While poverty and deprivation correlate with some forms of radicalisation, they are not direct causes. Extremists are drawn from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, including highly educated individuals. Indeed, some violent extremist groups actively recruit individuals with technical or professional skills, valuing their expertise for operational purposes. Similarly, while underemployment among young men has been linked to higher vulnerability in some contexts, the evidence remains mixed. Economic frustration may contribute to grievances, but it does not automatically translate into support for violent extremism.

Inequality and discrimination, particularly along ethnic or religious lines (i.e. horizontal inequalities), are more consistently associated with radicalisation than absolute poverty. When communities face systematic exclusion from economic opportunities, education, or state resources, perceptions of injustice deepen. These structural inequalities interact with political and identity grievances, creating an environment in which extremist narratives resonate. Thus, while socioeconomic factors alone do not explain violent extremism, they play an important role in shaping the broader opportunity structures in which extremist groups operate.

[5] Gottzén, L., (2025). Exploring the Link Between Masculinity and Violent Extremism: Remasculinization as Individual and Political Project. Sociology Compass: e70100. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.70100.

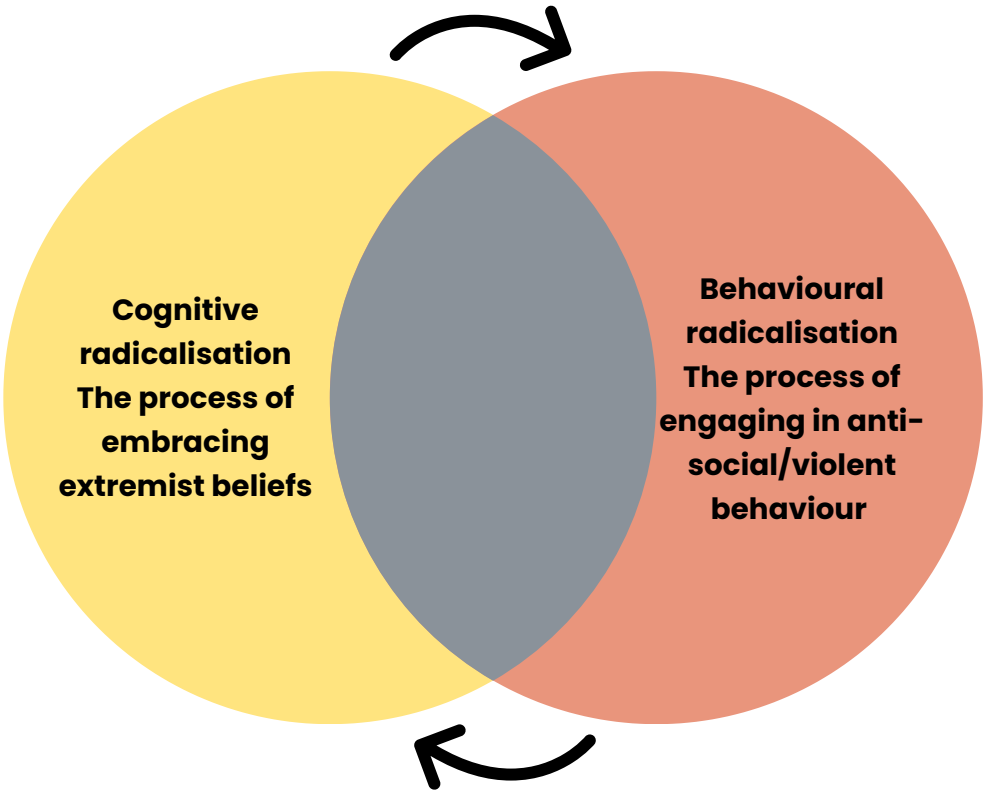
- ***Global narratives and perceptions of injustice***

Perceptions of global injustice, particularly narratives of attacks on religious groups, can serve as powerful motivators for radicalisation. Extremist propaganda often portrays conflicts in one part of the world as evidence of a broader global war against a particular identity group. These narratives resonate with individuals who perceive discrimination or marginalisation in their own contexts, linking local grievances to global struggles. Although the causal role of such narratives is debated, they are a common feature of extremist recruitment strategies and contribute to shaping ideological commitment.

3.2 RADICALISATION

If violent extremism is the outcome, radicalisation is often seen as the journey. Yet, radicalisation is not a straightforward process with clear stages. It is messy, uneven, and deeply personal. The challenge, therefore, is not to reduce radicalisation to a formula, but to understand how ideas, experiences, and opportunities interact in ways that can make violence appear appealing or justified.

Not all individuals who engage with violent extremism are radicalised; some may join, for instance, in search of financial rewards. Radicalisation is a complex and layered process that describes how individuals or groups come to adopt extremist beliefs (cognitive radicalisation) and, in some cases, engage in violent acts to advance them (behavioural radicalisation).

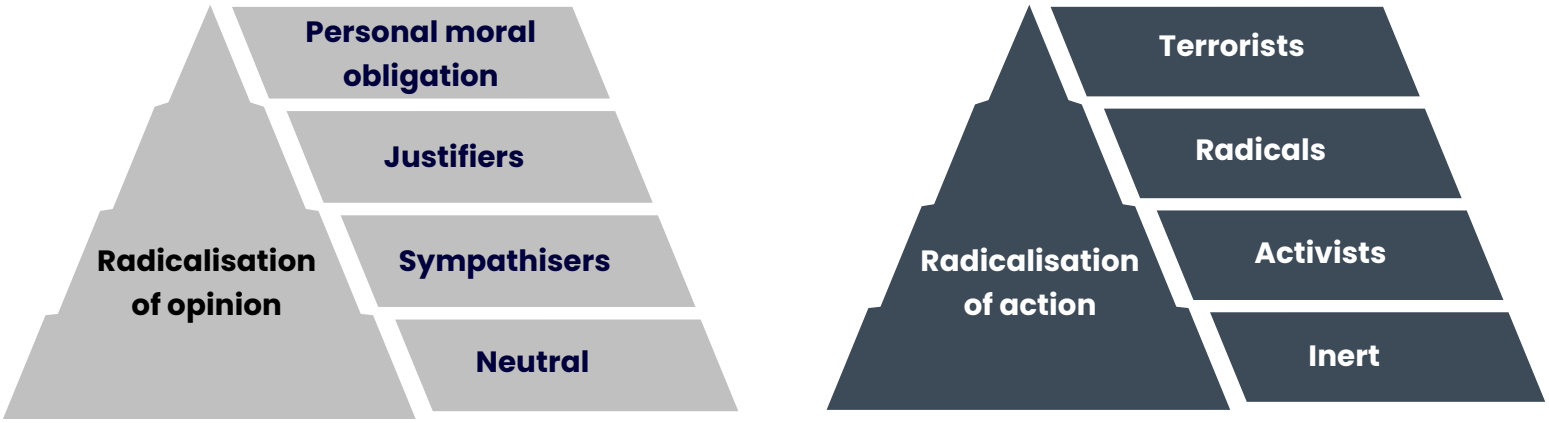


Radicalisation is neither inevitable nor uniform. Instead, it emerges at the intersection of personal experiences, group dynamics, identity struggles, and sociopolitical contexts. Effective prevention and intervention strategies must be rooted in an understanding of the pathways through which radicalisation occurs, the psychological mechanisms that sustain it, and the opportunities for redirection that can be offered.

Several conceptual models provide useful lenses for grasping these dynamics. We will introduce three of them: The Two-Pyramids Model, the 3N Model (needs, narratives, and networks), and the Devoted Actor Model. These are among the most useful frameworks to understand how radicalisation develops, why it persists, and where opportunities for engagement lie. Each model highlights different but interconnected aspects of the radicalisation process.

3.3 THE TWO-PYRAMIDS MODEL

For many years, radicalisation was imagined as a straight line: people moved from grievance to radical beliefs to extremist action in a predictable sequence. This assumption, however, proved too simplistic and often misleading. In 2017, psychologists Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko [6] proposed the Two-Pyramids Model of Radicalisation, a framework that captures the complexity of the process and makes an important distinction between radicalisation of opinion and radicalisation of action. Their model helps us avoid conflating thought with behaviour and highlights the need for nuanced interventions that respect both public safety and individual rights.



Two-Pyramids Model of Radicalisation

McCauley and Moskalenko visualise radicalisation as two separate pyramids. The first pyramid represents the radicalisation of opinion. At its broad base lies the majority of the population, people who hold mainstream views and support conventional political norms. Moving upward, the pyramid narrows to include smaller groups: first, those who sympathise with radical ideas, perhaps by expressing strong distrust of government or identifying with conspiracy theories, even if they do not endorse violence. Above them are individuals who justify violence as legitimate in certain circumstances. At the very tip of this pyramid are those who fully embrace radical beliefs and openly promote violence as necessary and desirable.

The second pyramid represents the radicalisation of action. Its broad base likewise contains the general population, people who go about their lives without engaging in political violence. The next level contains activists, those who participate in protests, demonstrations, or online campaigns. Their actions are oppositional but usually lawful. Above them are individuals who engage in illegal but non-lethal behaviour such as vandalism, property damage, or the financial support of extremist groups. At the apex of the pyramid are those who commit or plan acts of terrorism and other forms of violent extremism.

[6] McCauley, C., & Moskalenko, S. (2017). Understanding political radicalization: The two-pyramids model. American Psychologist, 72(3), 205.

By placing the two pyramids side by side, McCauley and Moskalenko highlight an essential point: radical opinions do not automatically translate into radical actions, and violent actions do not always stem from deeply held radical beliefs. Some people may climb high on the opinion pyramid, embracing extreme views yet never engaging in violence. Others may commit violence for reasons unrelated to ideology—peer influence, adventure-seeking, or personal grievances. The separation of the pyramids illustrates that the link between belief and behaviour is not linear but variable and contingent.

The Two-Pyramids Model provides several insights that are especially useful for those working in prevention. The first and most obvious is the recognition that opinion and action are distinct domains. This challenges the assumption that anyone who voices radical ideas is inevitably on a path to violence. A society that treats radical speech as synonymous with violent extremism risks overreach, stigmatisation, and the suppression of legitimate dissent. Conversely, by focusing only on ideology, practitioners may overlook individuals who become violent without embracing extremist worldviews.

A second insight is that pathways to radicalisation are multiple and varied. The opinion pyramid is shaped largely by ideological influences, narratives, and information environments. The action pyramid, by contrast, is often driven by social networks, peer dynamics, and lived experiences. These separate but overlapping processes mean that intervention strategies must be flexible and adapted to the particular pathway an individual is on.

The model also underlines the importance of critical transition points. Moving from sympathy to justification within the opinion pyramid or from activism to illegal acts within the action pyramid marks significant moments where the likelihood of escalation increases. Intervening at these junctures can prevent further radicalisation and help individuals reorient toward nonviolent, constructive engagement.

Ultimately, the model emphasises the need to strike a balance between security and freedom. In democratic societies, people are entitled to hold and express radical views, however uncomfortable. Only when these beliefs translate into harmful action does intervention by the state become essential. The Two-Pyramids framework, therefore, acts as a safeguard against over-policing thought, focusing attention instead on behaviours that pose genuine risks.

For CSOs in P/CVE, the model offers a practical lens through which to assess risk, design interventions, and engage communities. In terms of risk assessment, distinguishing between opinion and action is crucial. A person who sympathises with extremist ideas may not pose an immediate security threat, but may nonetheless benefit from educational programs, critical thinking workshops, or community dialogue that fosters resilience against manipulative narratives. Someone who has moved into justification of violence, however, represents a higher risk that requires closer monitoring and potentially structured engagement. By contrast, an individual who has already begun engaging in illegal or violent activity requires targeted intervention, potentially including law enforcement, deradicalisation support, or exit programmes.

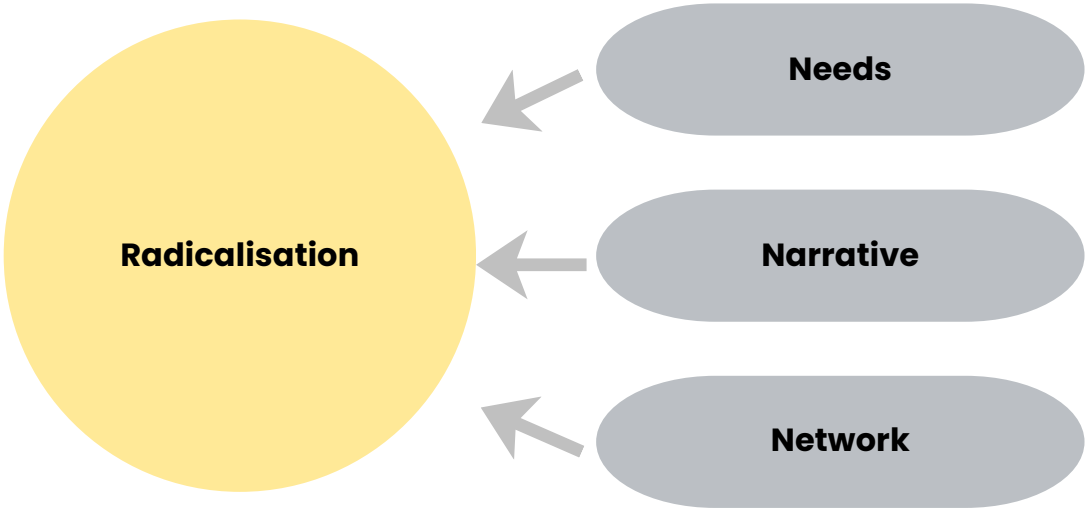
When it comes to interventions, the Two-Pyramids framework encourages differentiation. Work with opinion radicals often revolves around dialogue and debate. Counter-narratives, mentorship, or community engagement can help individuals explore alternative perspectives and question extremist claims.

Work with action radicals, on the other hand, requires addressing the behavioural dimension. This may involve offering alternatives to violent activism, supporting reintegration into community life, or, when necessary, applying proportionate legal measures.

Another implication is the importance of avoiding overreach. Treating radical opinions as inherently dangerous can alienate communities, reinforce grievances, and inadvertently push individuals further up the action pyramid. A proportionate response, one that distinguishes between protected speech and harmful conduct, preserves trust and avoids counterproductive effects.

3.4 THE 3N MODEL

The 3N Model, developed by Arie Kruglanski and David Webber[7], offers another important perspective by focusing on three psychological factors that drive radicalisation: Need, Narrative, and Network. The Need refers to the fundamental human desire for significance and meaning. Individuals who feel marginalised, humiliated, or deprived of status are often drawn toward extremist groups because these groups promise empowerment and purpose.



3N Model

The Narrative provides the ideological or moral framework that justifies radical beliefs and actions. It offers a story of who is to blame, what must be done, and why violence may be acceptable. Finally, the Network represents the social environment in which radicalisation flourishes. Friends, family, mentors, or online communities can either reinforce extremist pathways or provide protective alternatives.

Consider the example of a young woman who has experienced persistent discrimination in her community. Her Need for dignity and belonging is frustrated. She encounters an online Narrative portraying her group as victims of systemic oppression and framing violence as the only solution. Reinforced by a Network of peers who validate these ideas, she begins to embrace extremist ideology.

For CSOs, the 3N model emphasises three key points of intervention: meeting needs through empowerment programmes, countering extremist narratives with alternative stories of resilience, and fostering supportive networks that compete with extremist circles.

[7] Webber, D. and Kruglanski, A.W. (2016). Psychological Factors in Radicalization. In The Handbook of the Criminology of Terrorism (eds G. LaFree and J.D. Freilich). https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118923986.ch2

3.5 THE DEVOTED ACTOR MODEL

The conventional rational choice theory posits that people will seek options that maximise the benefits and minimise the costs. The Devoted Actor Model, developed by researchers at Artis International [8], shows why some individuals remain deeply committed to radical causes even when facing overwhelming costs. According to this model, when sacred values—beliefs considered absolute and non-negotiable—are fused with a person's identity and tied to a close, kin-like group, individuals may become willing to sacrifice their lives or well-being for the sake of the cause. Unlike material incentives, sacred values cannot be bargained away. This fusion of identity and sacred values creates what researchers refer to as "devoted actors."

The model emphasises several dynamics. First, identity fusion is critical: when people perceive their group members as family, their personal identity becomes inseparable from the group's fate. Second, devotion intensifies under threat. Third, devoted actors often experience a heightened sense of formidability, believing their group is stronger than it objectively is, and their adversaries weaker. This perception helps explain why they take extraordinary risks that outsiders see as irrational. Finally, devotion is marked by parochial altruism—a willingness to suffer or die not only for abstract ideals but also for the immediate ingroup that embodies those ideals.

Nevertheless, research conducted by GCERF and partner institutions[9] found that identity fusion can also promote outgroup trust and willingness to cooperate when contextual conditions are favourable. However, fusion positively predicts trust and cooperative intent only when the outgroup is perceived positively, when cooperation is seen as beneficial to the ingroup, and when relationships are not framed as zero-sum or historically threatening. The study concludes that fusion can yield cooperation or hostility, depending on perception and payoff.

For CSOs, the Devoted Actor Model highlights why conventional approaches, such as material incentives or rational arguments, often fail with hardened extremists. Interventions must instead respect the power of sacred values while working to redirect them. For instance, programmes might create new sacred commitments around community protection, spiritual renewal, or safeguarding the next generation. In a reintegration initiative, an ex-combatant might be encouraged to see protecting local youth from recruitment as a sacred duty, reframing devotion from destructive to constructive. By engaging devotion rather than dismissing it, CSOs can shift the same intensity of commitment toward peacebuilding and resilience.

[8] Sheikh, H., Gómez, Á., & Atran, S. (2016). Empirical evidence for the devoted actor model. Current Anthropology, 57(S13), S204-S209.
[9] Klein, J. W., Bastian, B., Odjidja, E. N., Ayaluri, S. S., Kavanagh, C. M., Mala, A. M., & Whitehouse, H. (2025). Identity fusion can foster intergroup trust and willingness to cooperate. Communications Psychology, 3(1), 124.

CASE FOR DISCUSSION

In the village of Karuma, a popular youth football club has recently become the focus of community concern. Initially formed to keep young men engaged and off the streets, the club began attracting youth from different neighbourhoods, including areas with high unemployment and low trust in authorities. Over time, a small group of players started meeting separately after practice to discuss politics, identity, and grievances about corruption, police harassment, and foreign influence in the country.

One charismatic player, Hamid, known for his strong religious devotion and leadership qualities, began framing these issues through a moral and ideological lens, arguing that "true believers must stand up against a corrupt system." He shares videos and articles from abroad, mixing religious rhetoric with calls for justice. Some teammates admire him and become more committed to the cause, while others remain focused on their football careers.

Meanwhile, the club's social media page has increasingly featured content that is critical of the government, although not explicitly violent. A few members have stopped attending school, claiming "the system is broken." Recently, two players suddenly left town and are rumoured to have travelled to a neighbouring country with a history of militant recruitment.

Discussion:

- How can we map the group's stance onto the "radicalisation of opinion" vs "radicalisation of action" pyramids? Which individuals appear to be moving up the action pyramid, and why?
- What needs, narratives, and networks are at play in this scenario?
- How might Hamid's strong moral convictions and identity fusion explain his leadership role?
- If your organisation were working in Karuma, what early interventions could help redirect the group's trajectory?
- Which model offers the most useful insights for understanding this situation, and why?

4. UNDERSTANDING P/CVE

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Define P/CVE and explain its importance in broader peacebuilding and development efforts.
- Describe resilience as a mechanism for prevention.
- Explain key concepts, approaches, and challenges related to deradicalisation and reintegration, including the return of foreign terrorist fighters.
- Design individual, community, and institutional-level interventions for P/CVE.
- Recognise the specific roles civil society organisations can play in P/CVE efforts.

Prevention is essential because addressing violent extremism after it has taken root is far more difficult, costly, and socially disruptive than stopping it before it starts. Extremist actors often take advantage of vulnerabilities such as social cleavages. Preventive approaches reduce these vulnerabilities and strengthen community resilience, thereby limiting the appeal of extremist narratives. Prevention, therefore, not only protects individuals but also preserves social stability and trust in institutions.

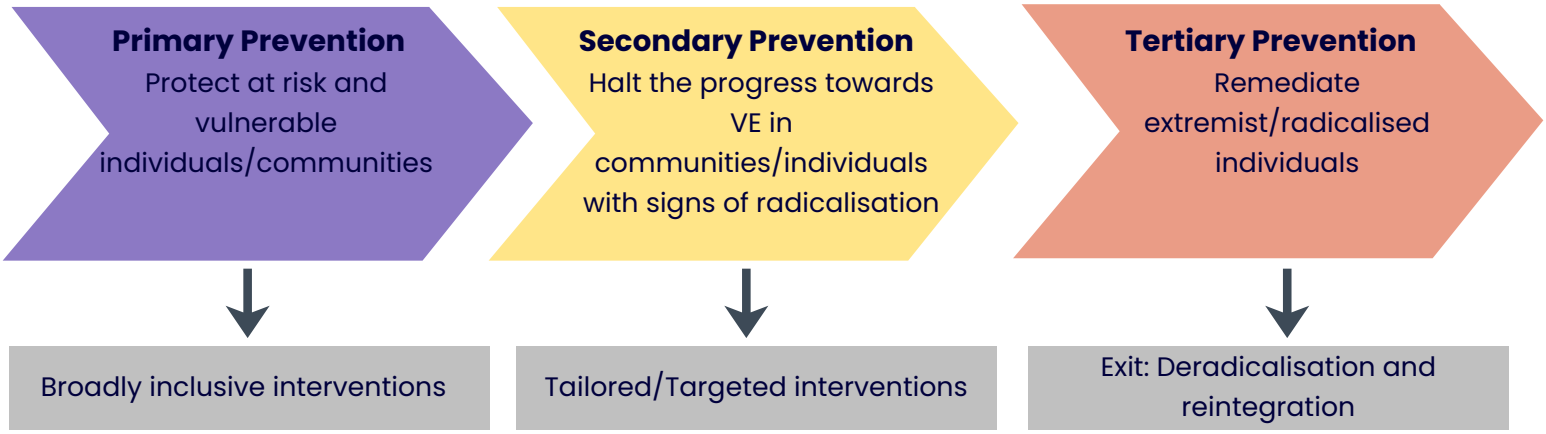
4.1 WHAT IS P/CVE?

Addressing the threats of violent extremism and terrorism has long been a securitised and militarised task, especially after the 9/11 attacks and the resulting "war on terror". However, it soon became evident that militarised responses were insufficient and sometimes even counterproductive. This realisation opened up space for the rise of "soft-power" approaches that draw mostly on participatory and development-oriented strategies. One of the most commonly used terms to describe the soft approaches is "preventing violent extremism".

Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) refers to proactive actions aimed at stopping individuals and communities from being drawn into extremist ideologies or networks. The notion of "Countering Violent Extremism" (CVE), which refers to targeted actions that reduce the influence and impact of individuals or groups who have already been radicalised or are on the path toward violent behaviour, remains, in many contexts, regarded as a realm of security actors. However, while CVE often involves law enforcement, CSOs also play a critical role, particularly in rehabilitation, reintegration, and community support. Moreover, PVE and CVE often overlap. Therefore, recently, PVE and CVE are usually placed under the single umbrella of P/CVE.

PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM (PVE)	COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM (CVE)
Focus: Preventing the emergence of violent extremism before it occurs.	**Focus:** Countering or intervening in violent extremism that has already emerged or is in the process of emerging.
Approach: Proactive, addressing root causes like social inequality, political grievances and marginalisation.	**Approach:** Reactive, focusing on disrupting extremist activities and ideologies once they have taken root. It also prevents recidivism.
Target: Vulnerable individuals and communities at risk of radicalisation.	**Target:** Individuals or groups who are already radicalised or actively engaged in extremist behaviour.

P/CVE operates across a spectrum of interventions. Primary prevention targets entire populations before any signs of radicalisation appear and may include school-based education, civic engagement campaigns, or community dialogues promoting tolerance and inclusion. Secondary prevention focuses on individuals or groups showing early risk factors, such as disengaged youth, those expressing extremist views, or isolated individuals, with interventions like mentorship, counselling, and family support. Tertiary prevention targets those already involved in extremist activities, emphasising rehabilitation or deradicalisation, reintegration, and social support to prevent re-engagement. A comprehensive P/CVE strategy links interventions across all three levels, ensuring continuous, context-sensitive prevention efforts.



4.2 RESILIENCE AS A PREVENTION MECHANISM

Resilience has become a key concept in contemporary discussions on peacebuilding and P/CVE. Although originally grounded in ecology and psychology, resilience has been increasingly embraced within the peace and security sector to describe the ability of individuals, communities, institutions, and societies to withstand, adapt to, and recover from shocks, stresses, and crises without descending into violence or instability. In the context of P/CVE, resilience is more than just survival or endurance; it involves actively strengthening social fabrics, governance structures, and civic skills to reduce the enabling environment of violent extremism, while also creating conditions for lasting peace.

At its core, resilience represents a shift from reactive crisis management towards a more preventative and adaptive approach. Early approaches to CVE tended to focus on security measures and counter-terrorism strategies designed to neutralise immediate threats. By contrast, resilience-oriented strategies prioritise building the underlying capacities that allow societies to anticipate, absorb, and recover from violence, extremism, or instability, thereby reducing their vulnerability in the long term. This involves enhancing the ability of communities to manage disputes peacefully, strengthening governance structures to deliver justice and services fairly, and fostering inclusive social and political systems that reduce marginalisation and grievance.

The application of resilience in P/CVE emphasises both structural and relational dimensions. Structural resilience involves the development of institutions, infrastructures, and legal frameworks that are capable of maintaining their core functions during times of stress. For example, resilient governance systems may continue to deliver essential services, uphold the rule of law, and maintain public trust even in the face of extremism or terrorism. Relational resilience, on the other hand, focuses on the networks, norms, and relationships that bind societies together. This includes trust between citizens and the state, social cohesion within and between communities, and the presence of inclusive dialogues and mechanisms for conflict resolution. These relational elements are particularly crucial in contexts affected by violent extremism, where extremist actors often exploit existing fractures in society to spread divisive ideologies and recruit supporters.

Resilience is also closely linked to the idea of local ownership and agency. Traditional peacebuilding and P/CVE interventions have sometimes been criticised for being externally driven, top-down, and disconnected from local realities. Resilience approaches, by contrast, emphasise the role of local actors as the primary agents of change. Communities themselves are seen as possessing valuable knowledge, networks, and adaptive capacities that can be harnessed to prevent extremism. For example, local religious leaders, youth groups, women's organisations, and community elders often play a pivotal role in mediating disputes, countering extremist narratives, and promoting inclusive social norms. By investing in these local capacities, resilience-based approaches seek to strengthen the foundations of peace and security from within, rather than imposing solutions from outside.

Another important dimension of resilience in P/CVE is its dynamic and evolutionary character. Resilience is not a fixed state that can be achieved once and for all; rather, it is a continuous process of adaptation in response to changing threats and contexts. This adaptive quality is particularly relevant in today's global security environment, where the drivers of violent extremism are often complex, interconnected, and rapidly evolving. Climate change, economic inequalities, political exclusion, technological transformation, and transnational ideological movements all interact in ways that can generate new forms of extremism. Building resilience, therefore, requires flexible strategies that can evolve over time, informed by ongoing learning, monitoring, and engagement with affected communities.

Despite its growing popularity, the resilience framework is not without its critics. Some scholars argue that resilience can be used as a depoliticising concept that shifts responsibility for addressing structural injustices from states and international actors onto communities themselves[10]. In this view, resilience risks becoming a convenient way for governments and donors to avoid tackling deeper political and economic inequalities by placing the burden of adaptation on vulnerable populations. Others caution that resilience should not be equated with mere coping. While communities may demonstrate impressive coping mechanisms under stress, this does not necessarily mean that the underlying causes of violent extremism are being addressed. For resilience to contribute meaningfully to P/CVE, it must be accompanied by efforts to transform unjust structures, address root causes, and create inclusive political and social systems.

Nevertheless, resilience remains a powerful and increasingly influential concept precisely because it bridges the gap between security, development, and governance. It encourages a holistic understanding of peace and stability that recognises the interconnectedness of individual, social, political, economic, and cultural factors. Moreover, it aligns with the growing emphasis on prevention within international policy frameworks, such as the United Nations' Sustaining Peace agenda and various national P/CVE strategies. These frameworks recognise that building resilience at multiple levels—individual, community, institutional, and societal—is essential to preventing violent conflict and extremism before they escalate into crises.

4.3 REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION

Despite all the efforts in PVE, many people are still radicalised or engaged with violent extremism. Therefore, deradicalisation/rehabilitation and reintegration are critical pillars of broader efforts to P/CVE. While prevention seeks to stop radicalisation before it occurs, de-radicalisation focuses on supporting individuals who have already adopted extremist ideologies or participated in violent extremist activities to disengage from violence and, ideally, change their beliefs. Reintegration, in turn, involves the social, economic, and psychological processes that enable these individuals to return to society safely, sustainably, and with dignity.

Supporting R&R of returnees is critical to:

- Reduce recidivism, new radicalisation and recruitment.
- Promote inclusion, tolerance and social cohesion, which are essential for fostering community resilience against violent extremism.
- Reduce stigma towards returnees, building trust within communities and fostering a sense of security.
- Address the drivers of radicalisation such as ideological influences, socio-economic disparities and political grievances.

[8] Chandler, D. (2013). International statebuilding and the ideology of resilience. Politics, 33(4), 276-286.

This area has gained increasing global attention with the return of former foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) from conflict zones such as Syria, Iraq, Somalia, and the Sahel. Their return presents complex security, legal, and social challenges, requiring coordinated approaches that balance accountability, rehabilitation, and community safety.

Deradicalisation can be understood in two ways. First, ideological deradicalisation involves changing individuals' belief systems, particularly their acceptance of violence as legitimate. Second, behavioural disengagement refers to stopping participation in violent activities, even if ideological beliefs persist. Not all individuals fully de-radicalise; many disengage behaviourally without abandoning extremist worldviews. This distinction matters because reintegration strategies may need to address both dimensions differently.

Reintegration goes beyond the individual to involve families, communities, and institutions. Successful reintegration means that returnees or former extremists can live law-abiding lives and rebuild constructive social roles, while communities feel secure and willing to accept them back. Reintegration is most effective when tailored, long-term, and supported by local stakeholders, rather than being purely punitive in nature.

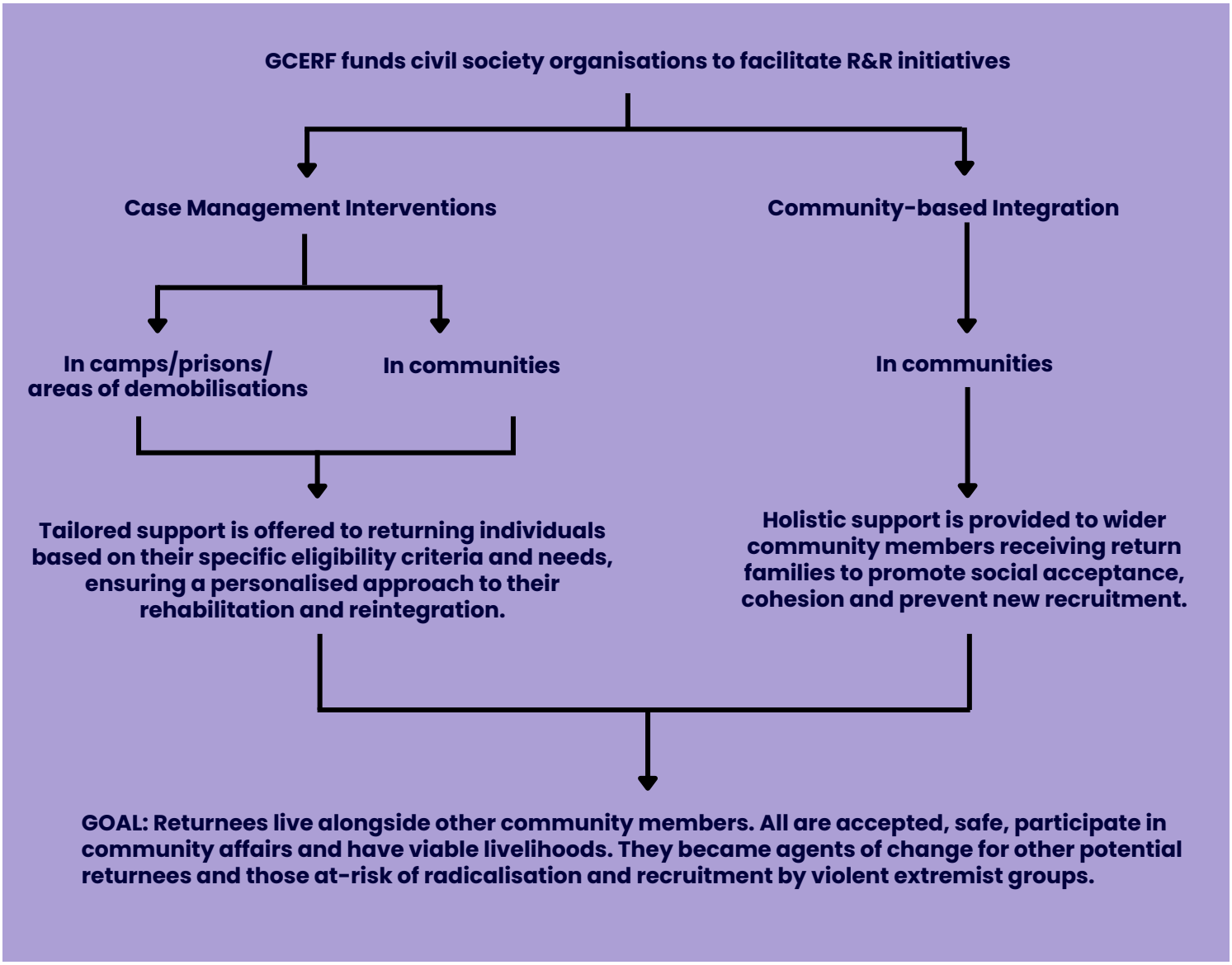
4.4 APPROACHES TO REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION

Deradicalisation programmes are diverse, but most involve a combination of psychological, ideological, educational, and social interventions. GCERF uses three approaches to R&R, namely case management, community-based reintegration (CBR) and hybrid (combining the first two)

Case management approach

This approach ensures tailored, person-centred rehabilitation by addressing the specific psychosocial, educational, and economic needs of each participant. The process begins with comprehensive assessments that identify the individual's risk factors, motivations, vulnerabilities, and protective elements. A case manager (often a trained social worker, psychologist, or community liaison) coordinates multidisciplinary support, linking individuals to counselling, skills development, education, civic engagement, and livelihood opportunities.

This approach is dynamic and iterative: case plans are regularly reviewed, progress is closely monitored, and services are adjusted as individuals progress through their reintegration journey. In PCVE settings, effective case management builds trust and accountability, providing structured support while promoting agency and responsibility among returnees. It also ensures that interventions are gender- and age-sensitive, trauma-informed, and integrated with broader community services.



Community-Based Reintegration (CBR) Approach

This approach recognises that reintegration is not only an individual process but a community one. CBR aims to enhance the capacity of communities to welcome, support, and coexist with returning individuals and their families. CBR interventions are co-designed with communities through participatory dialogue, ensuring that activities respond to locally defined priorities and benefit all members — not just former combatants. Typical CBR support includes community infrastructure projects, livelihood initiatives, psychosocial support networks, and peacebuilding activities that promote reconciliation and social cohesion. Importantly, benefits are delivered through communities rather than to individuals, reducing perceptions of favouritism or "rewarding" ex-combatants.

Communities are involved in the design, implementation, and monitoring of reintegration activities, ensuring long-term ownership. In fragile settings, CBR can also mitigate security risks, reduce stigma, and prevent re-radicalisation by fostering social inclusion and a sense of shared recovery.

Hybrid Approach

This approach builds on the assumption that the case management and CBR approaches are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing. Case management provides the structured, individualised support required for rehabilitation, while CBR creates the enabling environment necessary for sustainable reintegration. When combined, these approaches address both the personal and social dimensions of transition; rebuilding trust between individuals and communities and contributing to durable peace and resilience against violent extremism.

4.5 THE RETURN OF FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS

The return of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) poses a unique set of challenges. Thousands of individuals travelled to conflict zones between 2011 and 2019 to join groups such as ISIS, Al-Shabaab, or Boko Haram, and many still do so to date. As these groups lose control of their territories, many fighters, along with their families, begin or are seeking to return to their countries of origin.

FTFs and their families require sustained coordination, context-specific programming, and investment in both individual rehabilitation and community resilience. Drawing on lessons from GCERF-supported programmes in Iraq, the Western Balkans, Kyrgyzstan, Indonesia, and Northeast Syria, several key recommendations emerge:[11]

- **Strengthen Coordination and Institutional Frameworks:** Effective reintegration depends on strong cooperation between national governments, CSOs, international agencies, and local authorities. Establishing national and subnational coordination mechanisms ensures that social, security, and development actors work toward shared objectives. CSOs should advocate for and support governments to develop Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and establish multi-agency referral pathways for case management, ensuring clarity of roles and responsibilities across ministries, including justice, social welfare, education, and migration.

- **Ensure Legal Clarity and Documentation:** Legal identity is foundational to rehabilitation and access to services. Many returnees (especially women and children) lack birth certificates, marriage records, or identity documents. CSOs should advocate for and support states in streamlining legal processes for verification, reissuance, and nationality determination. CSOs can also provide paralegal assistance to returnees, helping them obtain documentation and access benefits without unnecessary bureaucratic delays.

- **Provide Comprehensive Psychosocial and Health Support:** Returnees frequently experience trauma, loss, and social alienation. Investment in mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) is essential, including trauma-informed counselling, parenting support, and community-based psychosocial activities. These services should be culturally sensitive and gender-responsive, with particular attention to the needs of children and female-headed households. Training frontline workers to recognise trauma and provide early intervention reduces long-term social and psychological risks.

[11] Malet, D., Williams, R. A., Osborne, K., & Ottoni, I. (2025). Working with returnees from Northeast Syria and Iraq: Rehabilitation and reintegration lessons from GCERF. Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund & School of Public Affairs, American University. https://www.gcerf.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/RR-Paper-2025.pdf

- **Promote Livelihoods and Self-Reliance:** Sustainable reintegration hinges on economic inclusion. Livelihood support should begin pre-departure, where possible, and continue through tailored vocational training, small business grants, and apprenticeships. Programmes should align with local labour market assessments to avoid saturating specific trades. Providing equitable opportunities for both returnees and host communities prevents perceptions of preferential treatment and supports broader social cohesion.

- **Reduce Stigma and Strengthen Community Acceptance:** Community engagement must accompany individual rehabilitation. Awareness campaigns, dialogue sessions, and involvement of respected community figures (such as religious leaders, teachers, and local influencers) help shift perceptions and promote empathy. Facilitating joint initiatives (e.g., community development projects or local peace committees) reinforces shared ownership and helps prevent isolation or resentment toward returnees.

- **Integrate Gender- and Child-Sensitive Approaches:** Women and children constitute the majority of returnees and face distinct vulnerabilities. Programming should ensure that women are active participants in designing and leading reintegration activities, rather than passive pa. Child-focused interventions should prioritise education reintegration, psychosocial support, and protection from exploitation. Family-centred case management ensures that intergenerational trauma is addressed holistically.

- **Measure, Evaluate, and Adapt:** Monitoring and evaluation frameworks should go beyond counting returnees to assessing the quality of life, community acceptance, and long-term stability. Success indicators must include psychosocial recovery, livelihood sustainability, and a reduction in stigma. Continuous learning, through communities of practice and adaptive management, ensures that programming remains relevant and effective.

4.6 P/CVE IN PRACTICE

Building on the discussions so far, we now look at some of the specific activities that can be implemented in P/CVE programmes. This does not aim to provide an exhaustive list of activities; instead, it gives hints for what is possible. Despite building on evidence and experience, P/CVE still depends on creativity and sensitivity to the context.

Individual-level interventions

PVE at the individual level is about equipping people with the skills and opportunities to resist extremist narratives and avoid pathways into violence. Individuals are the starting point of any prevention effort, as their personal choices ultimately determine whether extremist ideologies take root. However, individuals are never isolated: their vulnerabilities are shaped by their families, peer groups, schools, and broader social contexts. Effective interventions, therefore, engage individuals holistically, supporting their personal development while recognising the environments in which they live.

A central theme in individual-level prevention is the development of cognitive skills. Extremist ideologies often rely on simplistic, black-and-white worldviews that divide society into 'us' and 'them'. Programmes that teach critical thinking and media literacy help individuals evaluate information more carefully and recognise manipulation. These skills are particularly important in an age where extremist propaganda circulates rapidly online. Interventions that encourage reflection, questioning, and complexity prepare individuals to resist reductionist and absolutist narratives.

Another major strand of individual-level work focuses on identity. Extremist groups often attract young people by offering a strong sense of belonging and purpose. Prevention efforts, therefore, seek to create safe spaces where individuals can explore questions of identity constructively. This may involve mentorship, dialogue programs, or structured workshops that allow participants to grapple with issues of belonging, loyalty, and self-understanding without fear of judgment. Building healthy identities reduces the appeal of groups that exploit confusion or alienation.

Empathy and psychosocial development are also key. Extremist violence frequently depends on dehumanising others. Programmes that strengthen empathy, compassion, and emotional regulation counteract this dynamic. Counselling services, trauma support, and opportunities to engage with people from different backgrounds all contribute to developing individuals who are less susceptible to hatred. For young people, especially, programmes that model peaceful conflict resolution and encourage perspective-taking can shift how they see themselves in relation to others.

Values-based education is another tool. Rather than directly countering extremist ideologies, these programmes promote positive frameworks such as human rights, citizenship, and mutual respect. By grounding individuals in shared principles of justice and dignity, prevention efforts provide an alternative moral compass. The aim is not to impose specific beliefs but to encourage reflection on universal values that support peaceful and inclusive societies.

Peace education is also an important tool that equips individuals with the knowledge, values, and skills necessary to resolve conflicts peacefully, respect diversity, and resist extremist ideologies. It promotes critical thinking, empathy, and civic engagement, helping learners understand the social, political, and emotional dynamics that lead to violence. By embedding peace education within formal curricula and community-based learning, societies can address root causes of radicalisation such as exclusion, injustice, and intolerance.

At the individual level, it is important to avoid common pitfalls. Programmes should not stigmatise or label participants as "at risk", as this can reinforce feelings of marginalisation. Interventions must be designed with sensitivity, ensuring participants feel empowered rather than targeted. Equally, practitioners must recognise diversity: what strengthens resilience for one individual may not work for another. Flexibility and adaptability are therefore essential.

Counselling sessions for women affected by violent extremism in Kenya to heal trauma and provide peer support

Peace and values based education in schools to nurture the next generations of peace advocates, The Philippines

Skills training in Burkina Faso to strengthen resilience of youth at-risk of violent extremism and radicalisation

Critical thinking skills workshop for youth in Kosovo

Community-level interventions

Communities are both the frontline and the backbone of efforts to prevent violent extremism. Extremist groups often embed themselves in local contexts, exploiting grievances, divisions, and unmet needs. Equally, it is within communities that resilience and resistance to extremism can be nurtured. Community-level interventions, therefore, focus on strengthening social bonds, fostering dialogue, and creating inclusive environments where grievances can be addressed constructively.

One of the most effective approaches is genuine community engagement. When state institutions work in partnership with community leaders, youth groups, and civil society organisations, trust and legitimacy are built. This cooperation enhances early warning systems and reduces the likelihood that grievances will escalate unchecked. Community policing is one example, where police build relationships through dialogue, cultural understanding, and responsiveness rather than coercion.

Building resilient communities requires attention to both internal and external relationships. Strong bonds within a group provide social support, while bridges between groups reduce polarisation and mistrust. Linkages between communities and institutions ensure that concerns can be communicated and addressed. Interventions that encourage interfaith dialogue, neighbourhood cooperation, and civic projects have been shown to reduce the appeal of divisive narratives.

Dialogue plays a particularly important role. Extremist ideologies often thrive in environments where certain issues cannot be discussed openly. Providing safe spaces where grievances, identity struggles, and controversial topics can be explored helps prevent these conversations from being monopolised by extremists. Dialogue programs work best when they are coupled with concrete action, such as community projects that translate discussions into visible change.

Youth empowerment is another central component of community-level prevention. Young people are often the targets of extremist recruitment, but they are also key actors in building peace. Programmes that create safe spaces for youth to participate, develop leadership skills, and engage in community service provide meaningful alternatives to extremism. When youth feel valued and included, they are less likely to turn to violent groups for recognition.

Community interventions must also guard against tokenism. Subtle or purely instrumental engagement can breed cynicism. Communities quickly recognise when they are being consulted only to legitimise pre-decided policies. Sustainable prevention requires authentic partnership, long-term investment, and respect for local agency.

Community dialogue sessions on PVE in Mali.

Interfaith dialogues between religious leaders to propagate the message of peace and harmony among community members in Bangladesh.

Youth peace camps in Nigeria to encourage youth to advocate peace within their communities

PVE training for teachers in Mosul, Iraq

Institutional-level interventions

Institutions—whether schools, justice systems, or government agencies—shape the broader environment in which individuals and communities operate. When institutions are inclusive, accountable, and responsive, they strengthen resilience to extremism. When they are abusive, discriminatory, or corrupt, they fuel the grievances that extremists exploit. Institutional-level interventions, therefore, focus on reforming systems, promoting fairness, and ensuring that state and non-state structures support rather than undermine prevention efforts.

Education systems are particularly important. Schools provide more than academic instruction: they are spaces where identities are formed and values are transmitted. Programmes that integrate human rights education, encourage open dialogue, and validate diversity reduce the appeal of extremist ideologies. Teachers play a crucial role, but they require training and support to balance safeguarding responsibilities with fostering open discussion. When schools are seen as supportive rather than punitive, they can act as key sites of prevention.

Security and justice institutions must also be part of the solution. Where policing is abusive or discriminatory, trust is eroded, and extremist groups can present themselves as alternative sources of justice. By contrast, community-oriented policing, fair trials, and accountability mechanisms build legitimacy. Institutional reforms that ensure fairness and responsiveness are therefore essential for long-term prevention.

Government institutions more broadly must address systemic inequalities and ensure inclusive governance. Policies that protect minority rights, expand political participation, and tackle corruption reduce the grievances that extremist narratives exploit. At the same time, governments must engage with civil society in ways that preserve independence and credibility. Heavy-handed co-option can backfire, undermining trust in community organisations.

Frameworks and policies also matter at the international level. National strategies aligned with global principles emphasise prevention through development, human rights, and peacebuilding. However, these strategies must be adapted locally rather than imposed from above. Successful prevention requires institutions that are responsive to communities' lived realities.

Practitioners must remain cautious about securitising prevention. When prevention is framed solely through the lens of counterterrorism, it risks alienating the very communities it seeks to support. Institutional interventions should be grounded in inclusivity, accountability, and fairness rather than surveillance or control. The aim is to create systems that citizens view as legitimate, responsive, and just.

CASE FOR DISCUSSION

Amina, a 24-year-old woman from the town of Nembasa, left home at 19 to follow her husband and join a violent extremist group abroad. After her husband's death and a military defeat, she surrendered to foreign authorities, spent 18 months in detention, and was recently repatriated through a national reintegration programme. She received short-term rehabilitation and has now returned to live with her extended family.

The community response is divided. Some see her as a victim deserving support, while others view her as a security threat. There are rumours she may still hold extremist views. A local CSO has been asked to assist with her reintegration, but faces limited resources, community mistrust, and pressure from authorities to monitor her closely, which risks undermining trust-building.

Discussion:

- What mix of P/CVE interventions (individual, community, institutional) would be appropriate in Amina's case?
- What are the main reintegration challenges, and how might a CSO address them effectively?
- How should the CSO balance security concerns and community trust while supporting Amina?
- What ethical dilemmas might arise, and how could they be managed?

Strengthening trust between security actors and community members in Kenya

Peace education training for educators in Tunisia


RESILIENCE AGAINST VIOLENT EXTREMISM
Individual level
Community level
Institutional level
Societal/General public level
Improve spiritual, moral and intellectual support
-Life skills training
-Leadership training
-Mentorship
-Digital literacy
Disengagement and rehabilitation
-Deradicalisation
-Counselling, psychosocial support
- Social and economic reintegration
-Return of foreign terrorist fighters
Create social capital, foster non-violentce narrative and pluralism
-Dialogues (interfaith, intercommunity, and intergenerational)
- Creation and usage of mediation, conflict resolution and prevention platforms
- Civic education
-Community/public debates
Foster community agency
-Town hall/multi-stakeholder meetings
- Community policing, watch groups or early warning activities
- Positive role of local leaders
Improve state-society relations
-Create inclusive governance platforms
- Community-security forces dialogues
- Training of security forces on human rights
-Promote peace education and integrate psychosocial support in schools
Promote positive narratives
-Awareness raising (public mobilisation, manifestation, rallies, human chains or digital campaigns)
- IEC, traditional media/radio programmes
- Sports and cultural events with messaging

5. PARTICIPANTS SELECTION IN PVE PROGRAMMING

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Define P/CVE and explain its importance in broader peacebuilding and development efforts.
- Describe resilience as a mechanism for prevention.
- Explain key concepts, approaches, and challenges related to deradicalisation and reintegration, including the return of foreign terrorist fighters.
- Design individual, community, and institutional-level interventions for P/CVE.
- Recognise the specific roles civil society organisations can play in P/CVE efforts.

Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) programmes typically work in sensitive contexts with limited resources. If not following a concrete, transparent and consultative logic, the participant selection for a PVE programme can cause harm, worsen grievances, or even fuel radicalisation.

Participant selection is essential to target the right communities, avoid bias and/or profiling that can end up amplifying grievances, ensure transparency and accountability towards the community as well as other actions involved (e.g. donors), improve the programme effectiveness, reduce the risk of harm and enable a proper monitoring and evaluation of the activities.

5.1 PROJECT PARTICIPANT: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) programmes typically work in sensitive contexts with limited resources. If not following a concrete, transparent and consultative logic, the participant selection for a PVE programme can cause harm, worsen grievances, or even fuel radicalisation.

Participant selection is essential to target the right communities, avoid bias and/or profiling that can end up amplifying grievances, ensure transparency and accountability towards the community as well as other actions involved (e.g. donors), improve the programme effectiveness, reduce the risk of harm and enable a proper monitoring and evaluation of the activities.

- A project participant is someone who gains from the outcomes or impacts of the programme, directly or indirectly.

- A direct participant:
  - Can be named and given demographic details, as he or she is part of a programme's participant database
  - Is easy to count and describe
  - Has direct contact or active participation
  - Includes change agents and those with an intermediary role
  - Ex. Trainees, workshop attendees, attendees at community dialogues or public events
  -
- An indirect participant:
  - Cannot be named or given accurate details
  - Intended downstream participant
  - Not actively involved in activities
  - Can usually only estimate
  - Ex. Listeners to radio programme, attendees at event run by participants, other students of trained madrasa teachers, family or peers of trained youth who will benefit from their economic independence or to whom the youth will pass information or knowledge (where this is a part of the project plan)

Please note that this guidance aims to provide steps and key principles that support the selection of participants for PVE and R&R programmes. The principles should always remain the same. However, the tools (e.g. form with the criteria used for selection) must be adapted to the reality of the programme location and population(s) involved. It is important to adapt them to the programme outcomes and the target groups.

The information presented in this section is a compilation of practices in PVE programming, as well as from other areas.

5.2 KEY PRINCIPLES IN PARTICIPANT SELECTION

- Do No Harm: Ensure the selection will not create harm and engender grievances. For more information, see pg. 48.

- Human Rights-Based Approach: The selection must respect international human rights standards, and respect freedom of expression, association, and religion, and they must avoid stigmatising individuals or communities on the basis of identity. For more information, see pg. 46.

- Gender sensitivity: The selection must be aware of and respond to the different experiences, needs, vulnerabilities, and capacities of women and men, girls and boys, especially in how they are affected by, or participate in, violent extremism. For more information, see Section 7.

- Conflict sensitivity: The selection should recognise the context and analyse how the programme will manage the risks to avoid unintended consequences, such as undermining the peace efforts. For more information, see pg. 47.

- Child safeguarding: Apply (or develop) a Child Protection Policy, ensure parents or guardians consent, and ensure respect for the labour laws.

- Inclusivity: ensures that the selection process actively identifies and removes barriers that may prevent marginalized or underrepresented individuals or groups from accessing support.

- Representativity: ensures that the selected participants reflect the diversity of the broader population or target community (for ex. gender wise)

- Transparency: refers to the openness and clarity of the selection process. It builds trust and accountability by:
  - Clearly communicating selection criteria, procedures, and decision-making processes to stakeholders.
  - Documenting and sharing how and why participants were chosen.
  - Providing mechanisms for feedback, appeals, or complaints to address concerns or perceived bias

- Participatory approaches: Engage community leaders, local governments and other stakeholders at local level in the process

- Accessibility; the programme must be capable of accessing the places and groups selected

- Coordination: Coordinate with other actors working in the community (other CSOs, other programmes, etc) on their lists to avoid overlaps or to create synergies.

- Informed consent: ensure participants' awareness about the activities they will join and their consent before starting

- Engagement: Create mechanisms to keep the participants engaged in the programme throughout its implementation.

- Sustainability: Engaging with a group will enable long-term impact, not only immediate support.

5.3 MAIN STEPS TO CONDUCT PARTICIPANT SELECTION

- Context Analysis: If not done before for that specific area/group or to update a previous analysis.
  - Assess the local drivers of radicalisation and recruitment methods.
  - Assess the reintegration challenges.
  - Analyse and understand local conflict dynamics and sensitivities
  - Use existing assessments, local consultations, and stakeholders and security mapping.
  - Coordinate with other institutions conducting similar work
  - Please refer to Section “Evidence-based programmimg” of this manual for more information

- Establish an inclusive and representative selection committee
  - This includes local government, community stakeholders and leaders from community and other actors depending on the programme.
  - Usually, the focal point (s at national government level can support with the identification of the main target groups (strategy level) and/or put the programme teams in contact with local level authorities when needed.

- Identify criteria
  - Based on the consultations with the committee and in line with programme objectives (intended outcomes)
  - Present and discuss the selection criteria with GCERF

- Create thresholds and guidance for selection
  - Create a guidance with questions and criteria. See below some examples of guiding questions.
  - Important to consider the financial resources available for the programme
  - Important also to consider the access to the potential participants: will the programme be able to access the areas where they live? Will they be able to join programme activities, if held in areas other than where they live? Will the programme developed "copying strategies" to reach and actively engage throughout the life of the programme implementation specific target categories that requires special needs attention?

- Create/adapt a selection tool
  - Take into consideration the sensitivity of the data and the data collection

- Conduct the selection
  - Communicate clearly and widely about the selection, being transparent throughout the whole process from the beginning to the end. Avoid building expectations, disappointing and harming stakeholders.
  - Use the selection tool and criteria
  - Document the process, taking care of not exposing people's identifiable information

- Reach out to potential participants
  - Only when selection criteria have been agreed amongst the parties involved
  - Avoid overpromising any benefits to community members before the criteria are clear and the assessment of how many people can be included depending on the financial resources available

- Document the process throughout
  - This includes the selection criteria and the steps

Note: The steps for selecting participants in Rehabilitation and Reintegration programmes may differ from those outlined above. In an R&R programme, participation may be open to all those returning to a certain area, or all those disengaged from a certain group, or any other model agreed upon with the relevant stakeholders in the area of implementation. The engagement of participants, however, must always follow the same principles outlined in this document.

***Suggested questions when selecting the participants*:**

- Important to note that the questions should be linked to the criteria designed for each programme.
  - How is this community affected by violent extremism? How does working with this community have a direct impact on PVE? How could this prevent radicalisation and recruitment?
  - What are the resilience factors to be addressed in the community? Which groups should be targeted to achieve these factors?
  - Which are the groups that the programme could have the most significant impact on by engaging with (e.g. religious leaders)? Who are the main influencers on societal perceptions in that region/country?
  - Are there community needs/groups whose needs should be addressed, benefiting both community members and returnees?
  - Who are the government and other institutional authorities related to PVE and/or R&R in that country/region? How many of them are willing to participate in the activities? For how long will they remain in those functions?

Recap: What must be avoided in participant selection?

- Publish or share externally participants list
- Run activities without consent
- Prioritise quantity over pertinence to the selection criteria
- Lack of update of the participants list and/or keeping track of the participants
- Profiling of specific groups and individuals

***Tools to support participant selection*:**

- *Community Mapping Tool with information about other initiatives/services available*
- *Participant selection tool with criteria for participant identification*
- *Participant database with unique and anonymous identifiers*
- *Consent and Confidentiality Forms*

CASE FOR DISCUSSION

In Community A, a rural village in the border region of the Northern Province, a CSO called CSO A launched a PVE programme. The area had experienced increasing insecurity in recent years, including recruitment by violent extremist groups, especially targeting unemployed youth and displaced populations.

To select the programme's participants, CSO A conducted a household income assessment and, based on this, identified 30 individuals from Community A to participate in the first round of support. The selection was meant to prioritise those with low income. The results of the selection, including name, age and address of the selected participants, were posted on the CSOs' webpage. Among those selected were small-scale farmers, widows, and young people. All are certainly in need of support. However, the selection overlooked a very different group: young men and women who had returned from displacement camps, former low-level affiliates of extremist groups who had recently demobilised, were socially excluded and at high risk of re-recruitment.

Neither the community, nor could the local government were consulted. The CSO worked in that area before conducing a livelihoods programme funded by a Bank. They wanted to use a technical criterion (income), the same as the one used before. However, the nature of the programme was different and the resources were 10% of the ones available for the programme previously funded by the Bank.

It didn't take long before tensions began. Community leaders approached CSO A's local staff, asking why specific individuals had been left out. Rumours began to spread that the selection had been influenced by favouritism or corruption.

Discussion:

- What could have been done differently in the selection?
- Which steps should the CSO take before selecting the participants?
- How should they deal with the tensions?

6. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, DIGITAL SPACE AND THE FUTURE OF P/CVE

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the dynamics of online radicalisation in the digital age.
- Identify ways to implement P/CVE strategies in digital spaces.
- Understand how artificial intelligence can be used both as a tool for and against violent extremism.
- Discuss the future implications of digital technologies for P/CVE work.

The digital environment has become one of the central spaces where violent extremism is spread, challenged, and resisted. Whereas in the past extremist movements relied on physical networks of recruitment, local propaganda, or face-to-face persuasion, today their narratives travel across borders instantly and at very low cost. Online platforms have changed the scale and speed of extremist messaging, allowing individuals who might never have encountered such ideas in person to come into contact with them. For practitioners of P/CVE, this creates both significant risks and important opportunities.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) sits at the heart of this changing landscape. Recommendation systems already determine much of what people see online, and extremist groups have learned to exploit these systems. At the same time, governments, civil society actors, and international organisations are increasingly using AI-based tools to monitor, detect, and counter extremist activity in the digital space. This section examines three interlinked themes: first, the dynamics of online radicalisation; second, the specific role of P/CVE in the digital environment; and third, the ways AI can shape the future of P/CVE practice.

6.1 ONLINE RADICALISATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Extremist groups have adapted rapidly to the opportunities provided by digital platforms. They now utilise a wide variety of platforms, ranging from mainstream social media sites to encrypted messaging applications, fringe discussion forums, online gaming environments, and even video-sharing services. These spaces offer extremists several advantages. They allow them to reach a wide audience with minimal resources. They offer a degree of anonymity and security, enabling individuals to engage without the same risks that offline recruitment would entail. They also provide opportunities to build community across distance, creating a sense of solidarity for people who may feel isolated in their daily lives.

The digital space is also well-suited to narrative control. Extremist groups produce videos, memes, podcasts, and articles that present simplified explanations of complex political and social issues. These messages are often emotionally charged, easy to share, and capable of reaching people who would never read a manifesto or attend a meeting. The interactive nature of digital platforms reinforces this process. Algorithms that recommend content based on previous behaviour can unintentionally draw individuals further into extremist material, creating echo chambers where alternative perspectives are filtered out and hostile worldviews become normalised.

Online radicalisation is rarely a single leap but more often a gradual process. Individuals may begin by engaging with content that is not explicitly extremist but that shares themes of grievance, conspiracy, or polarisation. Over time, repeated exposure can normalise more extreme positions, especially if the person lacks strong protective influences offline.

Indicators of online radicalisation can include changes in online behaviour such as adopting extremist symbols or language, expressing rigid “us versus them” thinking, or withdrawing from offline social life in favour of virtual communities. It is important, however, to exercise caution. Many people experiment with online identities or consume provocative content without progressing towards extremism. Online indicators should always be considered in conjunction with offline factors, utilising established frameworks such as the Push and Pull Model to assess vulnerability.

6.2 P/CVE IN THE DIGITAL SPACE

Given the centrality of online environments, P/CVE efforts have increasingly focused on countering extremist narratives and building resilience in the digital sphere. One strand of activity involves the removal or moderation of harmful content. Major technology companies now employ both human moderators and automated detection systems to identify and delete material that incites violence. While this is important, it is not sufficient on its own, as extremist content often reappears on alternative platforms or migrates to less regulated corners of the internet.

Another approach is the development of counter-narratives and alternative narratives. Counter-narratives directly challenge extremist claims, providing factual corrections, exposing hypocrisy, or highlighting the harm that extremist groups cause to their own members. Alternative narratives adopt a more positive approach, offering constructive stories about identity, belonging, and purpose that counter extremist promises. These might showcase inclusive role models, promote civic engagement, or highlight opportunities for empowerment that do not involve violence.

Digital literacy is another vital area. Helping young people and communities to evaluate online information critically reduces their vulnerability to manipulation. Programmes that teach individuals how algorithms shape what they see, how to spot disinformation, and how to navigate online spaces safely are increasingly important in prevention work.

CSOs, however, face numerous challenges in the digital environment. Extremist content spreads rapidly and widely, making it difficult to keep pace. Groups often move between platforms, seeking new spaces when old ones become restricted. Official counter-narratives may be viewed with suspicion, particularly if they are produced by governments that the target audience distrusts. Monitoring and intervention also raise serious questions about privacy, ethics, and the balance between security and freedom of expression. These challenges mean that PCVE in the digital space requires careful design, trust-building, and a commitment to ethical practice.

6.3 ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND PCVE

Artificial Intelligence is already playing a decisive role in how both extremist groups and practitioners operate. On the extremist side, AI has amplified risks. Recommendation algorithms can push users towards increasingly extreme content by prioritising engagement over accuracy or safety. Generative AI tools enable the production of propaganda more quickly and affordably than ever before, encompassing text, images, videos, and even realistic voices. Extremists can use AI to create deepfakes that spread disinformation, to generate realistic content in multiple languages, or even to deploy chatbots that engage individuals in personalised conversations aimed at grooming them towards extremist ideology. As these tools improve, distinguishing between authentic and fabricated content will become more difficult, increasing the risk of manipulation.

On the CSOs side, AI offers valuable opportunities. Machine learning systems can be trained to recognise extremist symbols, language patterns, or networks across vast amounts of online data, allowing for faster detection and removal of harmful material. Early warning systems can utilise AI to identify shifts in sentiment or the emergence of new groups, enabling CSOs to anticipate threats rather than merely react to them. AI can also enable more targeted interventions by identifying individuals or communities that are most exposed to extremist content and delivering relevant counter-messaging directly to them.

Beyond monitoring, AI has potential in resilience-building. AI-driven chatbots or interactive platforms could deliver digital literacy training, connect individuals to support services, or provide safe spaces for dialogue. AI could also assist CSOs by automating repetitive tasks, such as coding data or scanning for trends, freeing up time for direct engagement and relationship-building.

However, the use of AI in PCVE must be grounded in strong ethical safeguards. Questions of privacy, bias, and accountability are central. Data collection must be proportionate and respectful of rights. Systems must be carefully designed to avoid reinforcing stereotypes or unfairly targeting particular communities. Transparency about how AI tools operate is essential if communities are to trust them. Human oversight must always be present to ensure that decisions are not left solely to machines, especially in matters as sensitive as prevention and intervention.

6.4 THE FUTURE OF P/CVE IN THE DIGITAL SPACE

The relationship between AI, digital platforms, and PCVE will continue to evolve. Three dynamics are likely to be particularly significant. The first is the technological "arms race" between extremists and practitioners. As PCVE actors adopt AI tools to detect and counter extremist activity, extremist groups will experiment with new tactics to evade detection, whether by manipulating algorithms, creating coded language, or exploiting new technologies. Practitioners must therefore invest in continuous learning and innovation, maintaining partnerships with technology companies, researchers, and civil society in order to stay ahead.

The second is the integration of AI into everyday PCVE practice. Just as social media monitoring has become routine, so too will the use of AI systems. This means that CSOs require not only traditional skills such as case management, facilitation, and community engagement, but also digital literacy and a working understanding of how AI systems function. Training programmes must adapt to prepare practitioners for this reality.

The third is the recognition that the most effective approaches will combine human and machine capacities. AI can process vast quantities of information and detect patterns that no individual could spot. But it cannot replace the empathy, trust-building, and cultural understanding that practitioners bring to prevention work. The future lies in collaboration, with AI supporting rather than supplanting human judgment.

7. PRINCIPLES IN P/CVE

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Apply human rights principles in P/CVE programming.
- Integrate conflict sensitivity into interventions.
- Implement a 'do no harm' approach when working in sensitive environments.
- Plan for sustainability in P/CVE programming to ensure long-term impact.

Every effective PCVE intervention should be grounded in a set of guiding principles that shape not only what is done, but also how it is done. These principles provide a framework to ensure that efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism are ethical, credible, and impactful. Four of the most important are respect for human rights, conflict sensitivity, the "Do No Harm" approach, and sustainability.

7.1 HUMAN RIGHTS

Respect for human rights is the cornerstone of P/CVE practice. As stated before, extremist groups often exploit narratives of injustice and oppression, claiming that states and institutions disregard the rights of certain groups. If P/CVE efforts themselves are seen to violate rights, they risk reinforcing these narratives and driving individuals further towards extremist ideologies.

In practice, this means that all P/CVE activities must comply with international human rights standards. Interventions should respect freedom of expression, association, and religion, and they must avoid stigmatising individuals or communities on the basis of identity. For CSOs, this requires careful consideration of how information is collected and used, how individuals are engaged, and how programmes are communicated to wider audiences.

Embedding human rights in PCVE work is not simply a matter of avoiding harm. It is also a way to build trust, legitimacy, and credibility. Communities are more likely to engage with PCVE initiatives when they see them as fair, transparent, and respectful of their dignity. Conversely, initiatives that compromise rights often lose community support and may even become counterproductive.

7.2 CONFLICT SENSITIVITY

Conflict sensitivity is the principle of understanding the broader context in which P/CVE programming takes place and ensuring that interventions do not exacerbate existing tensions. Violent extremism often emerges in fragile environments where communities are already affected by political, ethnic, or religious divides. In such contexts, even well-intentioned interventions can be misinterpreted or misused, unintentionally worsening divisions. For CSOs, conflict sensitivity requires seven steps:

- Understanding the conflict context: Effective P/CVE programming begins with a deep understanding of the political, social, economic, cultural, and security dynamics in the area of intervention. This includes identifying key actors, conflict drivers, historical grievances, power structures, and current trends. A thorough contextual analysis enables practitioners to anticipate how their interventions may interact with these dynamics.

- Analysing dividers and tensions: Dividers are factors that increase tensions and contribute to conflict. These can include political marginalisation, ethnic or religious discrimination, competition over resources, or exclusionary narratives. Identifying and understanding these dividers enables programme designers to avoid reinforcing them and to develop strategies that address underlying tensions.

- Analysing connectors and local capacities for peace: Connectors are relationships, institutions, values, or systems that bring people together and strengthen social cohesion. Examples include shared markets, inter-community committees, cultural practices, or respected mediators. Mapping connectors helps CSOs identify existing peacebuilding capacities that can be supported or strengthened through P/CVE programming.

- Analysing the programme: Conflict sensitivity requires a thorough examination of the programme itself — its goals, activities, stakeholders, geographical coverage, and modes of implementation. This analysis identifies potential points of interaction between the programme and the conflict context, both positive and negative.

- Analysing the programme's impact on dividers and connectors: Once dividers and connectors are identified, assess how the programme might influence each. Consider both intended and unintended consequences. For example, providing support to a specific group could unintentionally deepen grievances among others if not carefully managed, whereas promoting inclusive dialogue could strengthen existing connectors. Every programme involves the transfer of resources (financial, human, or material). These transfers can have conflict-related impacts. Unequal or poorly managed resource distribution can exacerbate tensions, while transparent and equitable approaches can strengthen trust and cooperation. Programmes also send implicit messages through who is included or excluded, whose voices are amplified, and what behaviours are rewarded. These messages can significantly influence community perceptions and dynamics of conflict. It is essential to ensure that implicit messages align with the principles of equity, inclusion, and respect.

- Considering programme options: Based on the conflict analysis and impact assessment, explore alternative strategies and approaches. This may involve adjusting target groups, changing implementation methods, modifying resource distribution, or introducing complementary peacebuilding activities. The goal is to identify options that minimise negative impacts on dividers while maximising positive impacts on connectors.

- Test programme options and redesign: Before full implementation, test the proposed options through pilot initiatives, stakeholder consultations, or scenario planning to assess their likely effects in the real context. Use feedback and lessons learned to redesign and strengthen the programme. This iterative approach ensures that interventions remain relevant and conflict-sensitive throughout the programme cycle.

Conflict sensitivity is not about avoiding risk altogether; rather, it is about recognising that interventions exist within a wider system and must be managed carefully. CSOs who apply this principle are better placed to build trust, avoid unintended consequences, and ensure that PCVE work supports, rather than undermines, broader peacebuilding efforts.

7.3 DO NO HARM

Closely linked to conflict sensitivity is the principle of "Do No Harm." This principle emphasises that interventions should avoid creating or worsening vulnerabilities, either at the individual or community level. In P/CVE, there is always a risk that programmes designed to protect individuals may inadvertently stigmatise them or expose them to additional danger.

For example, labelling individuals or communities as "at risk" without sensitivity can create feelings of marginalisation. Similarly, interventions that gather information carelessly may compromise privacy or lead to individuals being placed under suspicion. Even public awareness campaigns can sometimes backfire if they reinforce stereotypes or spread extremist imagery in ways that amplify rather than counter the message.

Practitioners should therefore apply a "Do No Harm" lens at every stage of their work. This involves anticipating potential risks, consulting closely with communities, and adapting activities to minimise harm. Monitoring and evaluation systems should include mechanisms for identifying unintended consequences early and adjusting accordingly. The principle of "Do No Harm" is ultimately about humility — recognising that even well-intentioned actions can have negative effects and committing to prevent these wherever possible.

7.4 SUSTAINABILITY

PCVE programmes are most effective when their impact extends beyond the immediate duration of a project. Sustainability is therefore a vital principle, ensuring that initiatives create lasting change rather than temporary fixes.

Sustainability has several dimensions. It includes the durability of outcomes, such as whether skills, knowledge, or resilience developed through a programme will remain once external funding ends. It also involves building the capacity of local actors (governments, civil society organisations, community leaders, and families) to continue prevention efforts in the long term. Sustainable PCVE work avoids over-reliance on international actors or short-term campaigns, instead investing in systems, institutions, and relationships that will endure.

For practitioners, applying the principle of sustainability means designing programmes with long-term objectives from the start. It involves prioritising approaches that strengthen community resilience, foster trust in institutions, and create opportunities for empowerment that extend well beyond the life of a specific project. It also requires ensuring that resources and knowledge are transferred to local actors who can carry forward the work.

7.5 INCLUSIVITY

Violent extremism may affect different groups in different ways, and their roles of various groups in preventing or engaging with extremism also vary. Programmes must ensure that all segments of society are included, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, age, disability, or socio-economic background, and are meaningfully engaged in designing, implementing, and participating in PVE initiatives.

In a community, the roles of recruiter, supporter, or survivor may be held by different people. Also, different narratives (e.g., promises of protection, identity, or belonging) can be used to target specific people for recruitment. In summary, people face different layers of vulnerability based. Failing to consider these differences can lead to ineffective interventions, missed opportunities for prevention, and even unintended harm.

At all stages, it is important to take into consideration:

- Context Analysis: Before starting a programme, it is essential to reflect on questions about the roles, power, access, and vulnerability in that location.

For example:

- Roles: Who is a respected leader in this community?
- Power: who has decision-making power in the community? And what about inside each family?
- Access: Who has access to services in this community?
- Vulnerability: Who is more vulnerable to recruitment in that community?

These initial assessments help map how different roles are involved in radicalisation and prevention in a community. It is important that this assessment includes representatives from the different groups in the community.

- Disaggregate Data by Gender and Age, and other groups, depending on the impact you would like to track.

- Engage Diverse Stakeholders: The programme shall involve all groups, as appropriate, in programme design and implementation.

It is important to ensure meaningful participation of these groups in decision-making, avoiding inviting them just to have them present in the discussion without a meaningful voice. It may require adaptation to the different groups and engagement techniques.

In the programme design, please take into consideration:

- Ensure that activities are tailored to the groups: Design interventions that address specific needs and build resilience for each gender group.

  Do not forget to include a budget tailored to the different needs (e.g., a higher budget for transport for activities involving certain groups that, otherwise, would not be able to attend; organise activities in the local languages, etc).

- Apply the Do No Harm principle since the design of the activities

  Assess the risks of backlash or increased risks for marginalised groups when joining activities (e.g., in certain areas, involving women in activities far from their homes without providing transport may pose a safety risk).

  Ensure protection strategies and safeguards against exploitation or retaliation (e.g., provide transport for that activity and/or conduct it at a time that is convenient for the group).

- Train staff and partners: Build the capacity of programme staff to avoid unconscious bias and implement inclusive approaches.

  Be open to hiring and/or assigning staff depending on the needs (e.g. staff who speak the language of the determined area).

- Select participants, including people meaningfully and avoiding assumptions: Ensure that the interventions are designed for the population group, and all participants are meaningfully included. This means that it is important to go beyond just counting numbers and ensure that each activity will tackle the more relevant group for the intended outcome.

- Ensure safe and accessible programming: Ensure selection processes and programme spaces are safe. Address barriers to access (e.g., childcare, accessibility, transportation, language norms).

- Ensure confidentiality and safety, especially when engaging survivors of gender-based violence or those at risk of backlash

CASE FOR DISCUSSION

In the displacement camp A, a non-state armed group with ideological leanings has gained informal control of some sectors. Humanitarian workers working in the camp report a rising number of pregnant women, which raised concern as the camp allows only adult women - all the male are under 16 years old.

There are reports that boys have been recruited and manipulated by women affiliated with the group, tasked to impregnate certain targeted women in the camp.

Reports suggest the women recruiters hold both ideological and coercive power and are believed to be operating under orders or influence from a broader extremist agenda that seeks to "repopulate" or "breed" a future generation aligned with their beliefs. Some women being impregnated report consent, others report coercion or psychological pressure.

An Initial programme in that camp worked only with women, engaging them in livelihood activities. They have not been willing to join those activities. Boys have been left out and feel frustrated.

Discussion:

- What are the different roles of women and boys in the camp?
- What are the power dynamics in the camp?
- What are the most common conceptions about gender and age for a PVE Intervention? Were they correct in this case?
- Should the CSO's interventions be adapted to the camp dynamics? Which considerations should be made?
- Which types of Interventions could be (re)designed for the different groups in the camp?

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