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**Youth-Led Advocacy in Nigeria: How GCERF Funding Helped Change the Law in Kogi State**

In 2019, the young men and women of Kogi State, Nigeria made history. Supported by GCERF and ActionAid Nigeria, a coalition of young people advocated to establish a Youth Development Commission to ensure their voices are represented in policies governing them.

This is the first time a local community has used GCERF funding to influence the law. The milestone enshrines in law a body mandated to increase socio-economic opportunities for youth and tackle head-on some of the key drivers of violent extremism.

**Young men and women driving change**

The Kogi Youth Development Commission Bill was was signed into law by the Governor of Kogi State on 24 April, 2019. “Today, we made history," said the Bill’s sponsor, Hon. Ahmed Mohammed. The Bill established a multi-stakeholder Youth Development Commission, whose mandate is to increase social-economic opportunities for youth, reduce anti-social behavior, and empower young men and young women. It paves the way for policies that enhance youth development and address some of the drivers of violent extremism.

The Bill could not have been signed into law without the ActionAid consortium and its Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) programme, funded by GCERF. The achievement provides important lessons for future PVE-programming.

**GCERF's work in Nigeria and the Action Aid Consortium**

GCERF's work in Nigeria started in 2016 when it committed USD4.2 million to build community resilience against violent extremism across four Nigerian North Central States, known colloquially as the Middle Belt. The region is an emerging hotspot for recruitment to violent extremism and terrorism.[[1]](#footnote-1)

GCERF supported five local consortia to design and implement PVE programmes, whose objectives were to address the drivers of violent extremism, identified through local needs and baseline assessments.

ActionAid Nigeria was the lead organisation of one of the five consortia, implementing the “System and Structure Strengthening Approach against Radicalisation to Violent Extremism” (SARVE) Programme in Kogi State. The SARVE programme took a whole-of-community approach and focused on women and youth. The purpose was to address the drivers of violent extremism, such as grievances caused by conflict between farmers and herders, a lack of social and economic opportunities for youth and the fractious State-society relationship.

One of the key results of the SARVE programme was its positive impact on communities. Community members reported feeling involved in decisions that affect them. SARVE established Community Action Response Teams (CART) both as part of efforts to prevent violent extremism and to serve as a conflict resolution response mechanism. One example of their impact was the signing of a peace pact between herders and farmers. The programme also contributed to the development and implementation of the Kogi State Plan on Peace and Security of Women and Children.

Another result was the passage of the Youth Development Commission Bill into law. The Commission will be responsible for establishing programmes to foster youth entrepreneurship and employment. These include a micro-credit and franchise scheme, a transition-to-work programme and skills training. The Commission will also support awareness-raising through media campaigns, sports and recreational activities.

The Commission is tasked with identifying labor market needs and areas of skills shortage, as well as managing a database on youth demographics, tracking all public investments in youth to facilitate planning and monitoring and evaluation efforts.

**The passage of the Bill**

The Bill was the result of a long advocacy process. As a first step, the SARVE programme provided youth with the tools and knowledge for advocacy, bringing youth organisations together into clusters. In these clusters, young men and women refined their skills and learned to identify key stakeholders, power holders and gatekeepers with influence over youth issues.

The youth organisations supporting the Youth Development Bill became known as the Kogi Youth Advocacy Cluster. With a strategic, youth-led approach, the Cluster established its values, recruited constituents and supporters and identified its opposition. The Cluster developed monitoring mechanisms and evaluated efforts made at every step of the journey.

The Cluster organised itself and engaged actors classified around two axes of power. The first was categorised as ‘power with’. These were groups whose public support was important for the passage of the Bill such as media, State Assembly members, elected officials, community leaders and youth. To gather support, the Cluster organised a series of marches, town hall meetings, advocacy visits, roundtables, protests and a social media campaign.

The second categorisation was 'power over'. These were actors directly linked with law-making and policy processes, such as the Speaker of the Kogi State House, the Chairman of the House Committee on Youth, the Kogi State Attorney General and Chief of Staff to the Governor. On this axis, advocacy visits and roundtables were crucial tools.

In all interactions, the Youth Cluster representatives applied their newly acquired advocacy skills to push for the establishment of the Commission as a crucial step in addressing youth concerns in Kogi State.

Despite opposition from stakeholders concerned about funding for the proposed Commission and the risk of the process being influenced by political forces, the Youth Cluster remained steadfast in its advocacy. The Bill was passed 10 months after its conception.

**Why is the Bill relevant to the prevention of violent extremism?**

According to GCERF’s theory of change, resilience to violent extremism is a product of the interaction of four factors.[[2]](#footnote-2) At the community level, these are social cohesion and community agency. At the individual level, they are equal access to opportunities and a sense of purpose.

The Youth Development Commission Bill addresses the drivers of violent extremism by building the resilience of communities and individuals across these factors, especially equal access to opportunities, community agency and a sense of purpose.

The Commission will do this by improving socio-economic conditions. A survey of 3,317 youth and adults across four Nigerian North Central States commissioned by GCERF and its partners, showed that 84 per cent of youth in Kogi State do not feel that their income is sufficient to sustain themselves and their dependents.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Although the relationship between poverty and unemployment with violent extremism is mixed,[[4]](#footnote-4) the lack of access to socioeconomic opportunities – a driver identified through baseline assessments - puts youth at risk of recruitment to violent extremism. For example, a survey of Boko Haram members, conducted by Mercy Corps in 2016, shows that initial membership to the group was motivated by anticipated support from Boko Haram for their businesses. Many accepted a loan before joining the group while others joined hoping to then receive material support such as loans or capital.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Therefore, the Commission and its programmes addresses an important driver of violent extremism that has been exploited by violent extremist groups in the northern part of the country and presented a real challenge to youth in Kogi State.

In addition, the establishment of the Commission is an example of a successful bottom-up advocacy campaign led by youth. It shows that community members can have their concerns heard by the government and influence law and policy-making through non-violent action. The multi-stakeholder nature of the Commission also ensures that this positive dynamic continues.

There is evidence that a tense relationship between State and society is a key driver of violent extremism.[[6]](#footnote-6) This is especially true when groups attempt to engage with the government but fail to have their concerns heard.[[7]](#footnote-7) In a recent survey in Kogi State, 38 per cent of youth still feel that their voices are not heard when dealing with government and authorities. This is a significant proportion, although seemingly lower than in the other three States included in the assessment: Benue, Nasawara and Plateau.[[8]](#footnote-8) [[9]](#footnote-9) The Bill directly addresses this by fostering a healthier and positive dynamic of participation and accountability between the State and youth. Moreover, in the minds of youth, the Bill reestablishes the State as a trusted actor.

Research shows that when the State is incapable of providing essential services, violent extremist groups often fill the void which increases the legitimacy and support towards the latter, and undermines the State relationship with the community.[[10]](#footnote-10) For example, in the north-central region of Nigeria, communities have often regarded the financial services provided by Boko Haram as sometimes more accessible than alternatives. Boko Haram used these services as a tool for recruitment and for gaining community support.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Youth involved in the campaign developed their sense of purpose. Not only did they acquire advocacy skills, but they also applied them through an organised and strategic campaign. Research has shown that if youth at-risk of radicalisation to violent extremism feel empowered because they can contribute through non-violent means, their affinity with violent extremism might decrease.[[12]](#footnote-12) However, the research is clear that for this to happen the community needs to listen to the youth and they need to see the impact of their work - as in the case of the Bill.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Moreover, the programmes under the mandate of the Commission have a high potential to foster self-confidence and a sense purpose on a large scale across Kogi State. As the coordinator of the Youth Cluster, Okwutepa Aminu Oseni, said, "The bill will also create opportunities for youth in the state to discover their capabilities, build capacities to be self-sufficient and contribute positively to the revenue base of the state.”

**Next Steps**

The successful passage of the Youth Development Commission Law hinged on the definition of a clear goal and well planned, inclusive activities. It was the product of a successful capacity-building approach for youth leadership and of a strategic public campaign.

The Bill brings several valuable lessons for GCERF programming. Funding upstream work, such as advocacy, is an important element of a successful programme and where possible, should be a part of any whole-society programming for preventing violent extremism. It builds the resilience of communities by strengthening their agency – and in this case, fostering a healthier relationship with the State.

It can also influence policy and trigger action on drivers of violent extremism on a scale beyond any community-level project through collaboration with local authorities.This represents a multiplier effect on GCERF investments. It also strengthens the sustainability of projects by embedding policies that address drivers of violent extremism into the local governance system.

GCERF’s assessments, including those directly involving affected youth, as well as research from other entities, clearly show that socio-economic conditions influence vulnerability. They may not be sufficient for triggering radicalisation to violent extremism, but they are a factor. When the Cluster centered its efforts on advocating for a Commission to address poor socio-economic conditions, it chose an issue that truly resonates with youth in Kogi State. Coupled with an advocacy campaign run and led by youth, the Cluster produced a message so pertinent to youth that they were easily mobilised and motivated to take action.

The Bill also shows that a successful PVE programme focusing on youth leadership needs to go beyond transferring advocacy skills. It must include a feasible opportunity for trained youth to apply those skills, and continuous support throughout the process to ensure focus and offer guidance. Without such support, it is unlikely that the Cluster would have managed to engage and convince the various stakeholders of its mission.

In summary, the advocacy efforts that culminated in the Bill were difficult but rewarding. The process highlighted important lessons for the consortium, for GCERF and for the PVE-field. The passage of the Bill, however, is just the first step. The Youth Cluster has now started building momentum to advocate for the implementation of the Bill.

GCERF continues to support the work of the Cluster and the ActionAid consortium. It committed more than USD5 million for a second round of grants to three consortia, including ActionAid’s, to continue to deepen and expand PVE programs in the Middle Belt of Nigeria to build safe, empowered and resilient communities.

1. Institute for Economics & Peace. (2019) Global Terrorism Index 2018: Measuring the impact of terrorism. Available from: http://visionofhumanity.org/reports (accessed 22 August 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. GCERF. (2017). GCERF strategy to engage communities and address the drivers of violent extremism (2017-2020), 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Centre for Research and Preventive Health Care (forthcoming), Report of a Baseline Assessment of Projects on Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) in Benue, Kogi, Nasarawa and Plateau States. *Draft* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Allan, H.; Glazzard, A.; Jesperson, S.; Reddy-Tumu, S.; Winterbotham, E. (2015) Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review. Royal United Services Institute. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mercy Corps. (2016). Motivations and empty promises: Voices of former Boko Haram combatants and Nigerian youth, 2016. Available from: [*https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Motivations%20and%20Empty%20Promises\_Mercy%20Corps\_Full%20Report\_0.pdf*](https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Motivations%20and%20Empty%20Promises_Mercy%20Corps_Full%20Report_0.pdf)(accessed 22 August 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hume, Elizabeth, and Myers, Emily. (2018). Peacebuilding Approaches to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism: assessing the evidence for key theories of change. Alliance for Peacebuilding. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Allan, H., Glazzard, A., Jesperson, S., Reddy-Tumu, S., & Winterbotham, E. (2015). Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature. Royal United Services Institute [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Centre for Research and Preventive Health Care (forthcoming), Report of a Baseline Assessment of Projects on Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) in Benue, Kogi, Nasarawa and Plateau States. *Draft* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The proportion of youth who do not feel heard by the government in Kogi State is clearly lower than in Benue and Plateau States, however it is within the margin of error in comparison with youth in Nassawara State (43%). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Grynkewich, A. (2008). Welfare as warfare: How violent non-state groups use social services to attack the State. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 31(4), 350-370, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Mercy Corps. (2016). Gifts and Graft: How Boko Haram Uses Financial Services for Recruitment and Support. Available from <https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Gifts_and_Graft_Mercy_Corps_Sept_2016.pdf> (accessed 23 August 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Hume, Elizabeth, and Myers, Emily. (2018). Peacebuilding Approaches to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism: assessing the evidence for key theories of change. Alliance for Peacebuilding. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-13)