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Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Eastern Africa in the COVID-19 Era*

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is rapidly creating an enabling environment for targeting and luring unsuspecting individuals into violent extremism, owing to the increased level of exposure and time spent on social media platforms in the context of lockdown measures. Terrorism has been a scourge in the Eastern African region, with Somalia being the hardest hit. Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda are no strangers to terrorist attacks either, as witnessed in the 1998 twin bombings of the U.S. Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam and the 2010 Kampala bombings. Whilst terrorism threats and incidences in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda have endured over time, it is important to mention that the Somalia-based al-Shabaab network is the main culprit behind these attacks. Their ideology, which is integrated into the global jihad framework, is anchored in the vision of establishing caliphates and spread Sharia law in Eastern and Central Africa.[1] This partially explains why the ideology has currently taken root in countries as far as Mozambique, where it

is posing significant threats and displacing communities through violence and terror. This new strategy demonstrates al-Shabaab's adaptability in the region. Al-Shabaab often attacks states in Eastern Africa to pressure regional governments to withdraw African Union troops from Somalia, raise its profile, seek new recruits, and solicit funding.[2]

Among the other countries in the region, Kenya has been the worst affected state due to its proximity to Somalia. The two countries share a long and porous border, as well as other political, economic (trade), and cultural connections or spillovers. Al-Shabaab's constant attacks prompted Kenya to launch military action in Somalia, through Operation Linda Nchi, to flush out the al-Shabaab terrorists and reduce the impact of terrorism in Kenya.[3] However, the operation seemed to have compounded the problem. Terrorists spread their wings across porous borders in a number of high-profile attacks, such as the assaults on Westgate Mall in 2013, Garissa University in 2015, Dusit Mall in 2019, and other active terror threats and violent extremism in the region.

Even though there have not been such heavy attacks and active threats of terrorism in Rwanda, the country has been sensitive to this security challenge. As put by the Prime Minister of Rwanda during an International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) African regional conference held in Kigali in February 2019, "To stop and prevent terrorism, there is an urgent need for strong cooperation. No single country can alone win this struggle. We need a much stronger regional and international cooperation."[4] In the same way, terrorism and violent extremism call for proper and coordinated research, policy, and practical interventions that seek to understand the ecology of both crimes in individual states. This is necessary not only to come up with coordinated response mechanisms, but also to build resilience. While Kenya and Uganda have national Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) strategies, Tanzania's strategy is anchored in community policing, or *Nyumba Kumi*.[5]

This paper examines the immediate and remote causes of violent extremism and formulates strategies for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) in Eastern Africa, especially in the COVID-19 era.

Conceptualizing PCVE

The resilience of any terrorist organization is not dependent on the number of trained members from the past but on its ability to continuously recruit, mobilize, and animate actual and would-be fighters, supporters, and sympathizers.[6] When a collective of people who share specific radical perspectives come together, they form a unitary identity, resulting in a subculture or community, also categorized as a radical milieu. Radical milieus are specific social environments whose culture, narratives, and symbols shape both individuals and groups. The growth and expansion of the internet has created these subcultures and communities that view online space as an institution that can be exploited for user gratification.

While discussing online radicalization and recruitment, the "simple causation-based approach" has been largely dismissed, and an agreement has coalesced around a broad set of parameters that act as ingredients in the radicalization process.[7] These include: **Grievance**, as a sense of alienation or disenfranchisement that provides a cognitive opening; **Ideology**, as the extreme set of ideas that provides the individual with a new outlook and explanation for the world he or she sees around him; **Mobilization**, as the process by which the individual slowly integrates into a like-minded, self-reinforcing community; and **Tipping points**, which are the specific events that push individuals from rhetoric into action. Digital interaction during COVID-19 posed a good opportunity for extremists to recruit new people into criminal groups through online interaction—especially young people who spend a lot of time surfing the internet.

Immediate and Remote Causes of Violent Extremism

1. **Religion:** Misinterpretation of religion has lured some youth into violent extremism through financial enticements and misleading religious teachings. Religious leaders from all faiths have been engaged in order to attack extremist ideology[8] to address terrorism.

2. **Marginalization:** There have been issues and claims of marginalization, both perceived and real, in the past. People in some regions feel that they have been marginalized for too long by their government and, therefore, have resorted to rebellion and joined violent extremist groups.

3. **Unemployment:** Terror groups have taken advantage of high youth unemployment in most African countries to radicalize and recruit young people through fake promises of greener pastures and monetary resources. Empowering youth would go a long way in curtailing their recruitment and radicalization.

4. **Technology:** Most of youth have access to radicalization materials from the internet and are recruited into terror groups through social media. Individuals that access to these ideologies and content can begin to become self-radicalized and carry out lone-wolf attacks.

5. **Adventurous Spirit:** Some youths join terror groups not because they lack anything but because they seek adventure. There is no single driver that can make a person join violent extremist groups. Governments have resorted to using the soft approach (as opposed to a hard security approach) to tackle violent extremism, where stakeholders from religious groups, civil society organizations (CSOs), academia, and social media, have engaged in dialogue or mediation to address the root causes of violence.

Challenges in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

Africa comprises many fragile states, and state fragility has been shown to be an incubator of violent extremism. The porosity of borders in Africa enables terrorist groups to move relatively freely across different states, fueling regional insecurity. Violent extremists easily move and relocate to new hotspots to radicalize innocent people and lure them into their groups. Corruption is rampant in many governments, especially in offering social services, which, in practice, typically fail to engage youth in useful programs. Interventions that target violent extremism do not align with sustainable peacebuilding nor deal with marginalization. Military intervention alone has also failed to succeed in effectively addressing violent extremism.

Strategies for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

Various strategies for PCVE in Eastern Africa have been identified. They include: youth employment and vocational training; civic engagement by local authorities; appropriate use of media; the implementation of evidence-based policies and programs; support for research to generate evidence; and advocacy to mainstream findings into government policies and programs. Others include timely information sharing and increased collaboration in the region.

The Role of Science, Technology, and Innovation in PCVE

Technology is a double-edged sword that can be destructive on the one hand or, on the other hand, can be usefully applied to offer solutions to life's challenges. For example, countries such as Italy and China used

robots and drones to monitor patients and supply drugs during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to avoid physical contacts as a way of preventing the spread of the pandemic. Similarly, the same technology can also be used to fight or facilitate violent extremism.

Methodology

To meet the multifaceted research objective of PCVE in Eastern Africa, two stages of research activity were deployed, where primary data was obtained from a high-level stakeholder dialogue and secondary data was obtained through desk study. A participatory session dubbed "High-Level Policy Dialogue"[9] on preventing and countering violent extremism captured the gist of PCVE in Eastern Africa. This session enabled selected high-level policymakers on the subject from different countries in Eastern Africa to discuss policy implications and a way forward for PCVE. Other stakeholders drawn from civil society and NGOs, universities and research institutes, and the media participated in the dialogue.

Key Findings and Discussions

Causes of Violent Extremism

It is evident that most recruitment into violent extremism happens along borderlines, especially due to marginalization.[10] It is also true that while most recruits had low levels of education, recruitment had taken place even in universities, targeting the highly educated as well. In many cases, people joined violent extremist groups due to financial constraints and joblessness. Some recruits think that joining al-Shabaab is just like joining any other military force, such as the police. However, some have also been forcibly recruited by extremists.

The other driving factor is weak democratic institutions, especially where people do not have confidence in their governments. Technology and globalization have also increased access to information where globalized ideas are generated to discredit some religions or ideologies. Recruitment is highly localized but influenced by globalized ideas. For instance, Al-Shabaab terrorists claimed that COVID-19 was only affecting infidels and therefore was a punishment from Allah. However, when COVID-19 reached their doorstep, they changed the narrative and said they would provide healthcare to people since governments had neglected them.

Another key issue is gender dynamics. The majority of African countries are patriarchal and fragile, thus facilitating violent extremism in the region, occasioned by a huge gap in gender equity.[11] The role of women in radicalization should not be taken lightly, as women are powerful and influential agents of change.

Hotspots for Violent Extremism

There should be caution when using the term "hotspot." Within Kenya, recruitment is not only concentrated in traditional hotspots like Garissa and Mombasa, but also in new frontier sites such as Migori in western Kenya. Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook have become the new, lucrative recruitment spaces/hotspots for violent extremism during the COVID-19 containment periods, as more people are now spending a lot of time at home.

COVID-19 Pandemic Ecosystem

During COVID-19 lockdowns, access to the internet has surged and thus so have the threats and vulnerabilities associated with the internet. Scholars have warned that existing institutions may unwittingly

mold, rationalize, and normalize behavior that is radical and extreme. It is now beyond doubt that social media is actively used to radicalize and recruit young people (including women) into extremism[12] and terrorism. Therefore, it has become critical to examine ways in which social media can be used for preventing and countering violent extremism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, where virtual communication and online engagements are surging.

Institutional Factors fueling Violent Extremism in Eastern Africa

1. **Capacity Issues:** Lack of capacity, knowledge, and skills within institutions fighting radicalization fuels violent extremism. For example, the police do not know how to identify violent extremists; much of the training provided to police is focused on maintaining law and order, not countering violent extremism.

2. **Lack of Effective Policies and Implementation:** Lack of clear country mechanisms in dealing with violent extremism has fueled violent extremism in Africa. There is a need to provide adequate resources to relevant organizations and institutions to conduct research and advocacy in PCVE. The outcomes will be the formulation of evidence-informed policies and programs for PCVE.

Strategies for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Eastern Africa

1. **Role of Youth:** There should be a regional framework for prioritizing youth projects as a way of engaging and empowering youth, thus making them less likely to fall prey to violent extremist recruiters.

2. **Role of Research and Policy:** There does not appear to be enough existing data on violent extremism for policymakers to adequately make decisions. There is, therefore, a serious need for scholars and research centers, such as the African Technology Policy Studies Network and the Center for Media, Democracy, Peace and Security at Rongo University, to be supported with funds to conduct research to generate enough data and evidence to inform policy and decision-making in preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) in the region and Africa as a whole.

Policy Options and Recommendations

1. **Strong Regional Collaboration**

   There are many frameworks that would permit deeper collaboration on counterterrorism initiatives across the spheres of defense, security, and leadership bodies, as well as the legal framework of the East African Community (EAC), which, under its Chapter 23, Article 6, allows for the formulation of counterterrorism entities. This calls for cooperation agreements in the region with a permanent office for countering violent extremism and enforcement of the law. Collaboration within the region is critical in order to effectively combat violent extremism.

2. **Investments in Research, Training, and Advocacy**

   Resources are required to support scholars to conduct applied research in the area of violent extremism, data on which is either scarce or non-existent in the COVID-19 period. Robust training is needed to enhance the capacity of those institutions involved in fighting violent extremism as well as those working in collaboration with youth and marginalized groups (potential targets for recruitment).

3. Information Sharing

Media, information sharing, and literacy training activities such as the Social Media Literacy Programs[13] conducted by educational institutions in partnership with tech companies and civil society actors are crucial for vulnerable youth and repentant al-Shabaab militants. Overall, timely information sharing with all stakeholders in critical for PCVE.

4. Psychosocial Support for Victims, Vulnerable Groups, and Repentant Militants

The first line of psychosocial support for victims of violent extremism should be focused on rebuilding their lives. For example, credit facilities can be made available to youth and marginalized communities so that they can open up businesses and secure incomes. In the long run, this helps them to reintegrate back into their communities. Also, efforts should be made to help repentant militants reintegrate back into their families and society. This accords them the requisite support system and prevents them from backsliding. Finally, vulnerable groups could be supported by encouraging them to form associations and self-help groups to sustain themselves and to preach against violent extremism in their communities.

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*This research paper is based on a Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding high-level policy dialogue in Eastern Africa that sought to examine immediate and remote causes of violent extremism and formulate strategies for PCVE in Eastern Africa, especially in the COVID-19 era. The paper underscores the need to create stronger networks to more effectively identify threats and respond to violent extremism across the region; cultivate working relations with at-risk individuals and groups through trust-based and long-term engagement in violent extremism-affected communities; and build the capacity of local leaders, government officials, civil society, research institutions, and informal networks to better understand and address violent extremism in their respective communities as well as through effective policies.

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The 2021 SVNP Joint Research Award Competition

This research paper was submitted for the 2021 SVNP Joint Research Award Competition. To mark the SVNP's 10th anniversary and as part of its mission to strengthen collaboration among members and share African knowledge about peacebuilding and state-building, SVNP established a competition for co-authored research papers analyzing key existing or emerging issues in peacebuilding in Africa, highlighting issues, lessons learned, and offering concrete actions that African and international policymaker to advance peacebuilding on the continent.

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