

Report Roundtable

Discussing the 2023 UNDP Report *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement* UNDP

31 August 2023

1. Opening Remarks by Dr Bibi van Ginkel, Programme lead on PCVE (Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism) at ICCT (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism) and moderator of the roundtable

Dr Bibi van Ginkel opens the roundtable and welcomes all participants, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) delegates, as well as the online partakers. She continues by thanking the MFA for their hospitality and presenting the topic of the event. Subsequently, Dr van Ginkel makes some historical reflections stressing that for a long time the PCVE and CT (Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, Countering Terrorism) agenda was mostly driven by the security sector and understood through a security lens. The development sector as a whole was not engaged in these discussions.

However, some years ago, a pivot occurred driven by the change of direction of the OECD and World Bank. They argued that it no longer makes sense to solely focus on the poorest social classes, since perceptions of poverty also have a destabilising effect on countries and communities. It appeared that the effects of violent extremism (VE) in the states where a lot of development aid programmes were implemented were devastating. With the adoption of the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General's PVE (Preventing Violent Extremism) Plan of Action, UNDP also made a historical turn and began engaging in those agendas. However, UNDP took a different approach than the traditional security partners, by being much more thorough in their risk and needs assessments, being conflict sensitive, and respecting the *do no harm* principle. They also were aware that to do proper PVE, it is necessary to have a good understanding of underlying grievances and motivational factors. Yet, empirical evidence was lacking. Despite all the efforts of the security sector in the earlier years, a thorough mapping had never been done. It is against the backdrop of this historical perspective, that UNDP embarked on their first research project, resulting in the publication of the first *Journey to Extremism* report (*Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment*) in 2017. This report has put the importance of research into grievances and motivational factors on the global map, making it a serious topic of discussion. Dr van Ginkel stresses that it was in that spirit, that the roundtable is organised. She closes her opening remarks by highlighting the importance of learning from the findings of the follow-up reports, and discussing their implications for the PCVE and CT sectors.

2. Introduction (Mrs Mina Noor, Head of CT & National Security Division and Special Envoy on CT at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

Mrs Mina Noor welcomes all participants at the Dutch MFA. She opens her remarks by stressing that lessons learned in the field of PVE and development are very much needed. For years there has been a rise of Jihadist groups, which today are impactful on the African continent, particularly in the Sahel region and West African coastal states. According to her, this poses an alarming development which is

the reason the roundtable is very timely. Mrs Noor continues by highlighting democratic backsliding in Africa (by referring to the recent coups in Gabon and Niger), stressing that extremist groups exploit these situations. In view of this dilemma, the meeting can help to better understand what must be done to counter these developments. From a Dutch perspective it is crucial that countries take the lead themselves. The most promising approach in that regard presents a regionally coordinated, community-sensitive response, upon request supported by the international community, as previous engagements have shown that a hard security response can often be counter-productive in the fight against VE and terrorism.

3. Report presentation: (Dr Giordano Segneri, Ms Nirina Kiplagat, UNDP)

The UNDP representatives begin their presentation by screening a short informative video on the UNDP Journey to Extremism 2023 report. Subsequently, they go further in depth on the three reports of the new PVE series.

The first report *Perceptions, Vulnerabilities and Prevention (2022)* aims to: 1) offer new data and analysis on the prevalence and severity of the drivers for VE in the southern Libya borderlands; 2) formulate policy recommendations in areas such as strategic coordination and early action in cross border areas; 3) support resilient communities against VE across Chad, Libya, Niger, Nigeria, and Sudan; and 4) better understand the dynamics of risk factors in the southern Libya border region. The report includes approximately 7,000 respondents from the regions of Northern Chad, Southern Libya, Northeast Niger, Northwest Nigeria, and Western Sudan. It specifically looks at three thematic groups, namely VE drivers, the recruitment by armed groups, as well as the affinity towards violent extremist groups (VEG). The report concludes that the susceptibility to recruitment by VE should be a cause for concern. Meanwhile, it stresses that identity (ethnic, tribal, and religious) matters, and highlights the importance of employing a people-centred approach. Finally, the first report makes a plea that achieving security must not be pursued at the cost of livelihoods.

The second report *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement (2023)* adds to the first report by reimagining the responses to VE. So far, much of the responses to VE in Africa by national and international actors over the past years continue to be dominated by security-driven approaches. In the last decade, in the eight countries under review, ODA (Official Development Assistance) support for humanitarian assistance ramped up considerably (up to 31 percent). Meanwhile, ODA support to the PVE related sectors, including peacebuilding, has consistently remained the least funded (2 percent). This suggests that there is a reactionary approach in ODA funding trends. Meanwhile, hard evidence highlights the positive return on investments in peacebuilding versus security responses estimated at a ratio of 16:1. In other words, for every USD\$1 invested in peacebuilding, it is estimated that USD\$16 could be saved on the costs of conflict and VE.

Going further into depth, the UNDP representatives discuss developments of the last years regarding CT strategies and responses to VE. In 2016, the UN Secretary General (UNSG) urged to foster preventive measures to address VE. He called for balanced implementation of the CT Strategy's "overlooked"

pillars I (prevention) & IV (human rights). It became apparent that prevention efforts remain grossly underfunded. This is the case until today. Despite heavy investments to combat terrorism and extremism (73 percent of allocation for measures to combat terrorism), global terrorist attacks have nonetheless increased in 2021. Especially the Sahel region has emerged as the new epicentre of terrorism, accounting for 48 percent of global terrorism deaths in 2021. Similarly, the numbers of attacks in the region accelerated tenfold since 2007. The focus of the second report is to analyse the changing nature of VE in Africa, as well as to take stock of efforts to counter or prevent its spread since the first report was published in 2017. Beyond that, it analyses the drivers, tipping points, and accelerators affecting vulnerability towards recruitment into VEGs, as well as the sources of resilience. Thirdly, it goes into further depth examining the pathways from extremism, with a focus on triggers for disengagement and deradicalisation. Finally, it strengthens the gender-lens, a dimension that has so far been widely overlooked in policy and programming of the PCVE and CT field.

Doing so, the second report conceptually approaches the presented topic through political socialisation theory. This underpinning research approach posits that pathways to and from VE are shaped in relation to the world around it, as well as through the exposure to other ideas, values, and belief systems. In that sense, the framework allows the uncovering of a ‘journey map’ of critical enabling factors, drivers, and triggers in the recruitment and disengagement process. More practically, the second report draws on 2,196 interviewees (75 percent male; 25 percent female) across eight countries (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan). It compares former recruits, as well as a reference group of individuals that had not joined a VE group about potential drivers of VE. Such an approach allows to test a number of hypotheses regarding drivers and ‘tipping points’ for VE and terrorist recruitment.

The second report finds that although 25 percent of surveyed voluntary recruits identified employment opportunities as their primary reason for joining, in contrast to the first study, there is no significant correlation between unemployment and susceptibility to VE. Meanwhile, the study confirms a statistically significant relationship between lack of religious education and susceptibility to VE. Beyond that, it appears that the levels of trust in state actors and institutions, including security and military actors, as well as satisfaction with public services and democratic participation are weak and low in the outlook of all respondents. In numbers, 58 percent of voluntary recruits exhibited little or no trust in their national government, compared to 50 percent of reference groups counterparts. Interestingly, among the 48 percent voluntary recruits who had experienced a trigger event, as many as 71 percent experienced short, punctuated, and sharp escalations of human rights abuses such as government action (32 percent), killing of a family member or friend (29 percent) and arrest of family members (10 percent). The study also finds that especially low levels of access to information and communication increases vulnerability to recruitment. Recruits that never use or lack access to internet at the time of joining, joined more quickly than others. From a gender standpoint, male recruits were more likely to join with friends (61 percent), female recruits with family (50 percent).

Looking at why individuals leave VEGs, 77 percent of those who chose to leave voluntarily through surrender or amnesty highlighted that their expectations were not met. In addition to that, disappointment of monetary rewards was more prevalent among those that joined quickly (42 percent), compared to those who joined within a year (32 percent). 54 percent stated that the group was not providing employment opportunities or doing a poor job of providing them. The study also finds that disillusionment with the group's ideology and/or actions are key in triggering a 'turning point.' 68 percent indicated that 'no longer agreeing with the group's actions' was the most influential factor affecting their decision to leave. 60 percent indicated 'no longer believing in the group's ideology', as the second most influential factor for their exit. The results also point to the 'cascading effects' of disengagement patterns, which are intricately linked to the decision of family, friends, and community members to leave. Finally, 40 percent who disengaged voluntarily from a VE group stated that government incentives and amnesty programmes influenced their decision.

The latest and third report of the series, *Dynamics of Violent Extremism in Africa (2023)*, details the modus operandi and the evolution of VEGs over time. It examines how these groups have increased their influence as ideological affiliates of global terrorist organisations such as ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) and al-Qaeda and penetrated new areas by exploiting localised grievances, all while positioning themselves as alternative service providers to the formal state. The main research rationale of the report comprises: 1) developments, including the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan and an increase in VEGs operations in select regions in Africa as well as a discussion on the international community's effectiveness in supporting state-building and peacebuilding efforts; 2) UNDP's recognition for the need to conduct a new study on the modus operandi of VEGs, their structures, dynamics, business models and ideology to inform policy recommendations; 3) additions to the insights into individual radicalization pathways and programmes that address the drivers.

This third report highlights the emergence of a form of proto state systems. Put differently, VEGs evolve as proto-state competitors for authority and legitimacy. Thereby they pose a new strategic challenge to the "formal state" itself and require adequate, tailored responses. Further, these new groups often act both global and local. Modern VEGs are both ideological affiliates of global terrorist organisations and local grievance entrepreneurs with locally rooted strategies and tactics. Hence, it is of crucial importance that programming needs to prioritise local grievances typically exploited by VEGs. These include marginalisation, discrimination, abuses by state forces, corruption, and ineffective service delivery. In terms of the political economy, the insecurity and poverty in which VEGs thrive can be considered as a "business model" for local elites whose leadership positions may depend on them. VEGs operate within this "conflict ecosystem." Therefore, contextualised strategic responses must apply a robust political economy lens to both state-building and peace-building trajectories.

A variety of policy implications derive from this. First, it is crucial to realise the promise towards effective oversight of human rights compliance, rule of law, and accountability to militarised and state-centric counter-terrorism responses. Second, policy needs to aim at re-imagining and reinvigorating the social contract from the bottom-up, all while strengthening state legitimacy through improved service

delivery, quality, and accountability of state service provision. Furthermore, conflict-sensitive approaches in efforts to address VE need to be embedded in existing policies. In the same vein, up-scaling support for localised, community-based human security approaches to preventing VE is of importance. Finally, it is crucial to reinvigorate PVE within peacebuilding and sustainable development policy frameworks in addition to recalibrating the commitment towards investing in cost-effective prevention and long-term development.

In conclusion, all three reports trickle down to the importance of understanding the individual pathways of the people who joined and disengaged from VEGs. Overall, the UNDP representatives summarise that:

- The Sahel region is emerging as the new epicentre of VE, representing 43% of global terrorism deaths according to the 2023 Global Terrorism Index. The hub of terrorism is moving towards countries facing political instability, conflict, and ecological degradation. UNDP PVE programmes covers 6 sub-regions across both Africa and the Arab States as the phenomenon remains transnational. Indeed, incremental VEG activity is also observed in the Mashreq of Arab States.
- Evidence shows that stand-alone security responses do not work. Highly localised root causes of VE must be addressed by development-based solutions.
- Besides the dominant security-centred response to counter VE, the ODA flows to address VE is reactionary; despite robust evidence of cost-effective preventative and peacebuilding approaches.
- UNDP has collected evidence that PVE-specific and PVE-relevant programming at national and local levels, as well stabilisation approaches deliver transformative results, which need to be scaled up.

4. Panel Presentations (Dr Fatima Akilu, Executive Director of the Neem Foundation; Dr Bart Schuurman, Associate Professor at Leiden University; Fulco van Deventer, Deputy Director at the Human Security Collective)

Dr Fatima Akilu, executive director of the Neem Foundation, begins her address with praising the importance and value of the recent studies from the UNDP. Next to providing great evidence, Dr Akilu particularly highlights the value of the forwarded (policy) recommendations. Having said that, she continues presenting her own programmes.

Neem Foundations' education programme (Yellow Ribbon) is implemented in Borno state (Nigeria) and targets young people. It aims at providing an understanding of the driving forces of radicalisation, and what motivates people to join Boko Haram and other extremist groups. With specialties in psychological and mental health services, the Neem team fosters better understanding of VE and helps former fighters with the process of deradicalisation and reintegration. The programme includes psychological counselling, faith-based services, vocational training, education, sports, and food distributions to former members of VEGs. Receiving people spend time in rehabilitation centres, where they are encouraged to think and reason critically. This aims at socialising individuals which have previously

often been isolated. The programme also works closely with the family of the beneficiaries.

The Neem foundation runs a second mental health programme which operates in Nigerian areas that normally do not benefit from development or PCVE programmes. The 7-week programme that helps with mental health problems is a crucial element for the success of peacebuilding efforts, benefitting over 25000 people a year. To ensure quality and effectiveness, the project incorporates an increased focus on monitoring and evaluation. Crucially, the insights gained throughout both NEEM programmes support the findings of the UNDP report(s) that have been presented earlier.

Dr Bart Schuurman, Associate Professor at Leiden University, turns towards the importance of resilience factors. Put differently, he focuses on what makes it less likely for radicalized people to turn to terrorist violence. This stands in opposition to the focus of much of the previous research on the drivers for terrorism and VE, or what makes people join VEGs. Dr Schuurman's research primarily focuses on North America and Europe; however, he argues that despite that, many of the findings are likely to hold in different contexts. His work finds that having a job, family, and relationship make an individual's engagement in violence less likely. Meanwhile, a high degree of self-control also decreases the likelihood of joining VEGs.

Surprisingly, being a member of a VEG can have an effect on not engaging in violence; although the present research applies only to European and North American countries. Such puzzling results can be explained if one understands that most VEGs realize their comparative military weakness vis-a-vis the state. Hence, most of them do not want to run the risk of being killed or arrested as a result of using terrorist violence. VEG members face extremely high opportunity costs for engaging in terrorist violence compared to continuing living in their established parallel communities. Importantly, this does not imply that governments should let VEGs remain in place, as many such groups actively seek to infiltrate and subvert state institutions, and will gladly exploit a crisis such as a (temporary) lack of law enforcement power or (locally) weaker governance capacity. Dr Schuurman's work thus highlights the importance of the state, both in terms of counterterrorism capacity and -most importantly- legitimacy. He stresses that many VEG members, at least those in Europe and North American countries, and particularly those on the right-wing extremist ideological spectrum, often have some degree of trust in the state left, serving as a further impediment to their use of terrorist violence. Hence, preventing terrorism in the long-run may be principally about states needing to (re)affirm their democratic credentials, (re)establishing effective governance, and focusing on (re)gaining the trust of the majority of citizens.

Mr. Fulco van Deventer, deputy director of the Human Security Collective, adds to these insights that less than ten years ago no one worked on or researched the topic of PCVE in close detail. Even less discussed were the root causes to VE and terrorism. The landscape was characterised by a hard/military/security approach that often involved the use of force. Mr van Deventer stresses that this changed around 2014 to 2015, when the UNDP first brought this topic into spotlight. Suddenly, there was increased debate on VE next to the established focus on terrorism. The same shift also initiated a

turn that looks at individuals and root causes of VE and terrorism. Similarly, to the other speakers, he stresses that governments have used and are still using hard security approaches to counter VE and terrorism, which in turn pushes even more people to join VEGs. In that sense, the first UNDP reports were the initial steps into this new direction. The newest report(s) is/are the most sophisticated response(s) so far. However, many questions remain to be discussed further, such as why Africa is proportionally high impacted by VE. To conclude, Mr. Deventer highlights the importance of understanding the dynamics between push and pull factors that incentivise people to join VEGs. In that regard, social contracts need to be reimagined. On the basis of this understanding, PCVE strategies should focus on addressing the root causes of VE, reducing the attractiveness of VE narratives, and reducing the recruitment potential of VEGs.

5. Panel Discussion

During the roundtable discussion participants had the opportunity to raise various issues and challenges, as well as to pose questions to the UNDP representatives Giordano Segneri and Nirina Kiplagat.

Sarah Gibbons, team leader of the CREATE project at Mercy Corps, initiated the discussion by making references to a 4-year PVE program by Mercy Corps that has been funded by the UK (United Kingdom). Mercy Corps' insights gained during their work with approximately 1300 recipients resonate well with the UNDP PVE report series. Ms Gibbons raises the importance of exclusion (societal, political), and the tipping point argument (experiences with police, military, etc.) in driving people into the arms of VEG's. Mercy Corps' program focusses particularly on mental health, skills creation, all while giving attention to the support of local institutions. In line with what has been said, she concludes that PVE is inherently related to development programmes. For the success of one or the other it is important to take an integrated approach and merge both fields. Today, development programming is often not put in place or has little funding. Similarly, peacebuilding and security missions often have no development component attached to it.

Following these remarks, **Raluca Popa**, Gender and Law Specialist at IDLO, highlighted the importance of the gender focus of the newest report from UNDP. She raises the question what role violence plays in the recruitment process for extremists. More specifically, she touches on issues concerning forced recruitments and gender differences (e.g., forced marriage). In short, she aims at posing the question of whether there exists a link between gender-based violence and VE. In response to Raluca Popa's remarks Nirina Kiplagat highlights that recruitment is often not as violent as many may think. This is not to say that there are no instances where this is not the case. In the UNDP report, women who are subject to forced marriage prior to joining a VE group and join with their husbands are not seen as forced recruits (this only applies to those who were abducted and forcibly married by VE group members). Having said that, she stresses that such categorization is debatable.

Eva Krah, Research & Learning Coordinator at 'Mensen met een Missie', raises the question to what extent religion plays a role in the recruitment and disengagement of VEGs. Nirina Kiplagat adds to this

topic that religion can be, and continues to be, used as a vector for recruitment. However, it is worth noting that recruitment focuses on contextualised local grievances. Therefore, religion should be seen more as a tool as opposed to a driver to VE and terrorism.

Among these topics, the audience also raises issues regarding ideology and the impact of democracy (**Floortje Klijn**, NIMD), the importance of a functioning social contract (**Mina Noor**, MFA), as well as the influence of political economy and ecology (**Grace Ellis**, Clingendael).

6. Closing Statement (Tijmen Rooseboom, Special Envoy for the Sahel, Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

To conclude the roundtable, Tijmen Rooseboom stresses that his experiences from the Sahel region correspond with the findings of the reports. He stresses that Jihadism is still on the rise and one of the main threats in the region. However, with many coups having occurred in the Sahel region, PCVE approaches are under pressure. The new regimes have been born out of hard power struggles and continue to prefer the use of military force. As has been sufficiently discussed, this can be counterproductive in the fight against VE and terrorism. Finally, he stresses that from a practitioner's standpoint many of the themes discussed in the roundtable are difficult to achieve. For instance, reimagining a social contract begs the question of how this is successfully done. Hence, he calls for the importance of gaining further knowledge and continued research.

Report by Mathis Böhm, PCVE intern, ICCT
