

# Desecuritizing Kenyan Youth

## Young People's Perspectives on Community Priorities in Mombasa



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Kenya, like many countries on the African continent, has been experiencing a population explosion. Young people below the age of 15 constitute 41 percent of the population, and those between 15 and 34 represent 35 percent.<sup>1</sup> Under the right conditions, a youth bulge can be harnessed by putting more people into the labor force, increasing local wealth production and the consumer base, and freeing resources for investment in long-term economic growth and development. Although this may work in theory, many factors can enhance or undermine a country's ability to benefit from the windfall.<sup>2</sup> Developing economies, particularly in states with fragile institutions and high levels of corruption, may be unable to produce sufficient employment to satisfy the basic needs of society. Crippled by structural adjustment policies and wracked by decades of kleptocratic governance, institutions and services established to assist those in need languish in disrepair. Youth, desperate for change, may find themselves barred from meaningful levers of power and influence. As young people make up a greater share of the Kenyan population, more of them enter the ranks of the unemployed, leaving the country increasingly vulnerable to political, social, and economic shocks. Understanding young people's capacity to obtain a

livelihood for themselves and their families and have a voice in local governance is critical for formulating targeted policies and programs to support Kenyan youth in achieving meaningful and fulfilling lives.

Yet, as severe as the challenges of youth poverty are, the predicaments faced by Kenyan youth have garnered national and international attention for other reasons. Over the past several years, economic deprivation and sociopolitical marginalization, combined with proximity to Somalia and the threat of al-Shabaab, have contributed to growing concerns of radicalization and recruitment of Kenyan young people and children into violent extremist groups.<sup>3</sup> Evidence of al-Shabaab recruitment activities in Nairobi and the Coast and Northwest areas, along with high-profile attacks on Kenyan soil, has increased the urgency to counter terrorism and potential underlying conditions conducive to violent extremism. Young Kenyans, particularly in Muslim communities, have been increasingly targeted with a range of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programs, many of which are delivered under the guise of development initiatives. Although some may argue that an uptick of development assistance being delivered

1 Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS), "Labour Force Basic Report: 2015/16 Kenya Integrated Household Budget Survey," March 2018, p. 6, <https://www.knbs.or.ke/launch-201516-kenya-integrated-household-budget-survey-kihbs-reports-2/#>.

2 See African Institute for Development Policy, "East African Regional Analysis of Youth Demographics," May 2018, p. 4, [https://www.afidep.org/download/research-reports/18.06.2018-ReAYD\\_Web.pdf](https://www.afidep.org/download/research-reports/18.06.2018-ReAYD_Web.pdf).

3 A 2014 survey of al-Shabaab members of Kenyan origin found that 78 of 95 joined the group before age 30. Anneli Botha, "Radicalisation in Kenya: Recruitment to al-Shabaab and the Mombasa Republican Council," *ISS Paper*, no. 265 (September 2014), p. 18, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/Paper265.pdf>.

under the rubric of P/CVE can still produce positive development outcomes, the overarching goals of development assistance, even those of the development community's peace-building and security agendas, are nevertheless very different from those of counterterrorism and P/CVE.

Undoubtedly, addressing conditions conducive to poverty and joblessness among Kenyan youth and partnering meaningfully with them to design policies and institutions that fulfill their needs are going to be critical for Kenya's security and development in the long term. Yet, counternarrative and surveillance activities commonly associated with the prevention of violent extremism tend to place the burden of countering violence on communities themselves rather than on governments to take serious steps to rectify inequity, injustice, and insecurity. Prioritizing and making progress toward the achievement of governance and development goals also have the added benefit of reducing the risk of violence and extremism.

Recognizing this, the Kenya Community Support Centre (KECOSCE) in partnership with the Global Center on Cooperative Security organized a series of focus groups to hear what young people in Mombasa County thought about their economic situation, political power, and sense of security and well-being. This undertaking follows a pilot study of community attitudes in Kenya and Somaliland in 2012–2013 by the Global Center, Integrity Research and Consultancy, the Kenya Muslim Youth Alliance, and the Observatory of Conflict and Violence Prevention.<sup>4</sup>

The focus groups were comprised of randomly sampled youth from communities in Mombasa County. A total of 60 respondents, among them 46 youth (26 male, 20 female) constituting three focus groups and 16 grassroots women leaders forming a fourth focus group, participated in the study. Of the participants, 7

percent had received graduate degrees, 52 percent had a postsecondary or college-level education, 31 percent had a secondary school-level education, and 11 percent had primary-level education. Only one of the 60 participants was formally employed; the rest were engaged in informal employment or volunteer work. Focus group discussions were led by a lead researcher and organized and facilitated by a KECOSCE project team, using a survey codesigned with the Global Center. Discussions took place in Kiswahili and were recorded in notebooks, then translated into English.

## BACKGROUND

Beginning in the wake of intercommunal violence that gripped the country following the December 2007 reelection of President Mwai Kibaki, Kenya has endured a traumatic decade. Yet despite a tumultuous global economy, a major constitutional reformation in 2010, two highly contentious national political contests, and the devastating campaign of al-Shabaab terrorism that further intensified after its invasion of southern Somalia in 2012, Kenya has enjoyed steady albeit slowed economic growth and relative political stability. Kenya stands as the fifth-wealthiest country on the African continent and enjoyed the fourth-highest wealth growth between 2007 and 2017.<sup>5</sup> The boons of Kenya's economic success, however, have not been felt by all. The last decade has seen rapidly rising levels of wealth inequality; less than 0.1 percent of Kenyans control more than half the national wealth.<sup>6</sup> High unemployment, particularly among youth, has reached near-crisis levels, with the Kenyan Parliament earlier this year declaring the situation a "national disaster."<sup>7</sup> Youth, defined by the Kenyan Constitution as young people between the ages of 18 and 34, make up around 55 percent of the labor force yet constitute 85 percent of Kenya's total population of unemployed.<sup>8</sup>

4 Liat Shetret, Matthew Schwartz, and Danielle Cotter, "Mapping Perceptions of Violent Extremism: Pilot Study of Community Attitudes in Kenya and Somaliland," Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, January 2013, [https://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Jan2013\\_MPVE\\_PilotStudy.pdf](https://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Jan2013_MPVE_PilotStudy.pdf).

5 New World Wealth, "The AfrAsia Bank Africa Wealth Report 2018," September 2018, <https://enterprise.press/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/africa-wealth-report-2018.pdf>.

6 Brian Ngugi, "More Kenyans Get Super Rich in a Tough Economy," *Daily Nation*, 4 October 2018, <https://www.nation.co.ke/news/More-Kenyans-get-super-rich/1056-4791234-er21ocz/index.html>; Oxfam International, "Kenya: Extreme Inequality in Numbers," n.d., <https://www.oxfam.org/en/even-it/kenya-extreme-inequality-numbers> (accessed 4 January 2019).

7 Tina Mwambonu, "MPs Pass Motion Declaring Youth Unemployment a National Disaster," *Star*, 17 October 2018, [https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2018/10/17/mps-pass-motion-declaring-youth-unemployment-a-national-disaster\\_c1836452](https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2018/10/17/mps-pass-motion-declaring-youth-unemployment-a-national-disaster_c1836452).

8 KNBS, "Labour Force Basic Report," pp. xii–xiv.

Although the process of devolved governance that emerged from the 2010 constitution has produced mixed results, it has done little to shift the core dynamics of a political system dominated by an entrenched ethnopolitical and -corporate elite under an unyielding system of patron-client capitalism.<sup>9</sup> In Mombasa, the challenges facing youth are manifold. Despite its position as a major commercial and tourism hub, Mombasa is wracked by intense inequality and high levels of poverty and unemployment. The county's educational system has long suffered from underdevelopment, and school enrollment rates sit well below the national average. Drug use and gang-related crime has been rising.<sup>10</sup> Mombasans younger than 35, which constitute 79 percent of the county's population, have limited options.<sup>11</sup> Compounding these challenges are a lingering sense of tribalism and religious division. Mombasa, despite perhaps being Kenya's most cosmopolitan city, is riddled with political tension and sporadic episodes of violence stemming from perceptions of continuing marginalization and injustice and exasperation at the privileged socioeconomic position of transplants from the interior of the country.<sup>12</sup>

Once the capital of Coast Province administration under the pre-2010 constitutional dispensation, Mombasa has endured a history of economic, political, and social marginalization.<sup>13</sup> Prior to its annexation by the British East Africa Company in 1890, coastal Kenya was within the territory of the Sultanate of Zanzibar and home to a predominantly Muslim but ethnolinguistically diverse African, Arab, and Swahili population. With its subjugation, the British colonial administration dismantled the customary system of land tenure, restricting land ownership to the most

powerful Arab and Swahili families to open up lands to non-African settlers, while rendering the larger population to the status of squatters.<sup>14</sup> After Kenya declared independence in 1960, its inland political elite co-opted the Coast elites who were calling for autonomy and used their privileged access to and control over the state to sweep up newly available lands and wealth in Coast Province. In the decades that followed, many communities in the province, as elsewhere in the country, have been sidelined under Kenya's zero-sum, winner-takes-all system of patronage politics. By the time of the country's first multi-party election in 1992, a steady influx of predominantly Christian "up-country" Kenyans into Coast Province was compounding long-standing grievances over land tenure and reviving calls for autonomy.<sup>15</sup> To indigenous communities living in and around Mombasa, devolution held the promise of a new period of locally controlled development premised on inclusive governance. Eight years later, many feel this promise is unfulfilled.

Compounding these issues, the coastal region of Kenya has experienced a wave of attacks by al-Shabaab and its sympathizers in recent years in public venues, such as bus stations, hotels, and bars. In June 2014, more than 60 people were killed when militants raided the coastal town of Mpeketoni, targeting a television hall where people were watching a World Cup soccer match, as well as two hotels, a police station, and a bank. In July 2017, 13 civilians were beheaded in an attack on Jima, a village in Lamu County, resulting in the imposition of a 90-day curfew in Lamu, Garissa, and Tana River counties. The Kenyan government's repressive counterterrorism response has largely targeted Somali refugees, ethnic Somali

9 See Geir Sundet and Eli Moen, "Political Economy Analysis of Kenya," *Norad Report*, no. 19/2009 (17 June 2009), <https://norad.no/globalassets/import-2162015-80434-am/www.norad.no-ny/filarkiv/vedlegg-til-publikasjoner/political-economy-analysis-of-kenya.pdf>.

10 Kennedy Mkutu et al., "Mombasa and Isiolo Counties Crime, Violence and Prevention Survey," World Bank et al., 2017, pp. 19–21, <http://crimeresearch.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Mombasa-and-Isiolo-Counties-Baseline-Survey-2017.pdf>.

11 KNBS and Society for International Development, "Exploring Kenya's Inequality: Pulling Apart or Pooling Together?" 2013, p. 10, <http://inequalities.sidint.net/kenya/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2013/10/SID%20Abridged%20Small%20Version%20Final%20Download%20Report.pdf> (abridged version of the report).

12 See Wanjiku Mungai and Saul Musker, "Mombasa: A City of Fragile Potential," *Brenthurst Discussion Paper*, no. 1/2017 (March 2017), <http://www.thebrenthurstfoundation.org/workspace/files/mombasa-fragile.pdf>; International Crisis Group (ICG), "Kenya's Coast: Devolution Disappointed," *Crisis Group Africa Briefing*, no. 121 (13 July 2016), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/file/67/download?token=8YqjE59S>.

13 See Mwandawiro Mghanga, *Usipoziba Ufa Utajenga Ukuta: Land, Elections, and Conflicts in Kenya's Coast Province* (Nairobi: Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2010), [https://ke.boell.org/sites/default/files/usipoziba\\_ufa\\_utajenga\\_ukuta\\_book\\_index.pdf](https://ke.boell.org/sites/default/files/usipoziba_ufa_utajenga_ukuta_book_index.pdf).

14 ICG, "Kenya's Coast," p. 6.

15 Mghanga, *Usipoziba Ufa Utajenga Ukuta*.

Kenyans, and Muslims.<sup>16</sup> Young Muslim men in Mombasa and the wider coastal region have come under intense law enforcement scrutiny in connection with counterterrorism efforts. Since 2007, Kenyan police and military units have been implicated in extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances and rendition, torture, and arbitrary detention, sweeping up many innocent victims in Kenya's Muslim communities, particularly in and around Mombasa.<sup>17</sup>

Against the backdrop of deep economic deprivation and political marginalization of young people in the county, Mombasa and the coastal region have increasingly been labeled a "hotbed" for radicalization to violent extremism, including by development-centric actors such as the UN Development Programme.<sup>18</sup> Alongside an intensifying hard-security response to terrorism-related violence in the Coast region, there has been a rapidly proliferating series of efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism driven primarily by the international community in partnership with local civil society and the Kenyan government.<sup>19</sup>

Young people and women in Mombasa County and across Kenya generally are demographics frequently examined in the growing body of P/CVE-related studies produced over the past decade.<sup>20</sup> The literature widely refers to unemployment, economic deprivation, and political grievances as central drivers of violent extremism and urges the design and deployment of P/CVE programming interventions that target these drivers to build resilience in communities vulnerable to violent extremism.

Grievances associated with unemployment, economic deprivation, political marginalization, systemic corruption, and human rights abuses, long recognized as potential drivers of violence and conflict, are also recognized as equally applicable in the context of P/CVE.<sup>21</sup> As P/CVE began to take center stage as a major international security priority, so too has it come to occupy a prominent place on the agendas and in the budgets of major actors in the development community.<sup>22</sup> P/CVE programs are increasingly being

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- 16 Otsieno Namwaya, "Deaths and Disappearances: Abuses in Counterterrorism Operations in Nairobi and in Northeastern Kenya," Human Rights Watch, 20 July 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/20/deaths-and-disappearances/abuses-counterterrorism-operations-nairobi-and>.
- 17 Open Society Justice Initiative and Muslims for Human Rights, "'We're Tired of Taking You to the Court': Human Rights Abuses by Kenya's Anti-Terrorism Police Unit," 2013, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/human-rights-abuses-by-kenya-atpu-20140220.pdf>; HAKI Africa, "What Do We Tell the Families? Killings and Disappearances in the Coastal Region of Kenya, 2012–2016," December 2016, [http://haki africa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/HakiAfricaWDWTTF\\_V14.pdf](http://haki africa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/HakiAfricaWDWTTF_V14.pdf).
- 18 UN Development Programme (UNDP), *Support to the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Kenya*, n.d., p. 2, <http://www.ke.undp.org/content/dam/kenya/docs/Peace%20Building/Fact%20Sheet%20-Support%20to%20the%20Prevention%20Violent%20Extremism%20in%20Kenya.pdf>.
- 19 See "Mombasa County Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Mapping Report," July 2018, <http://www.mombasa.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/FINAL-REVISED-MAPPING-REPORT.pdf>; Fathima Azmiya Badurdeen and Paul Goldsmith, "Initiatives and Perceptions to Counter Violent Extremism in the Coastal Region of Kenya," *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 16 (Fall 2018), pp. 70–102, <http://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/download/162/126>; Citizen Support Mechanism, "Citizen Support Mechanism to Counter and Prevent Violent Extremism," n.d., <https://citizensupport.go.ke/> (accessed 25 December 2018).
- 20 See Lauren Van Metre, "Youth and Radicalization in Mombasa, Kenya: A Lexicon of Violent Extremist Language on Social Media," Peacetech Lab, n.d., <https://www.peacetechlab.org/kenya-ve-lexicon>; Horn Institute and Centre for Sustainable Conflict Resolution, "Mapping Dynamics and Perceptions of Violent Extremism: A Study of Nature, Drivers and Perceptions of Muslim Women and Girls Towards Violent Extremism in Kenya," <https://horninstitute.org/downloads/MDPVE%20Survey%20Report%20PRESS1906201701.pdf>; Irene Ndung'u and Uyo Salifu, "The Role of Women in Violent Extremism in Kenya," *East Africa Report*, no. 12 (May 2017), <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/ear12.pdf>; Sirkku Hellsten, "Radicalisation and Terrorist Recruitment Among Kenya's Youth," *NAI Policy Note*, no. 1 (February 2016), <http://nai.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:906144/FULLTEXT01.pdf>; Anneli Botha, "Assessing the Vulnerability of Kenyan Youths to Radicalisation and Extremism," *ISS Paper*, no. 245 (April 2013), <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/164232/Paper245.pdf>.
- 21 See Matthew Schwartz, "Shifting the PVE Paradigm: A Think Piece on Human Insecurity, Political Violence, and New Directions for Preventing Violent Extremism," *Global Center on Cooperative Security Policy Brief*, September 2018, <https://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/GCCS-Shifting-the-PVE-Paradigm-07-09-18-v2.pdf>; World Bank, *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security and Development*, 2011, p. 83, [http://wdr2011.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/WDR2011\\_Full\\_Text.pdf](http://wdr2011.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/WDR2011_Full_Text.pdf); Guilain Denooux and Lynn Carter, "Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism," USAID, February 2009, [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/Pnad978.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pnad978.pdf).
- 22 See UNDP, "Statement on Prevention of Violent Extremism Programmes," 8 March 2017, <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2017/03/08/test.html>; Prevention Project and Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund, "Opportunities and Challenges for Mobilizing Resources for Preventing Violent Extremism," 21 June 2016, [http://www.organizingagainstve.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Meeting-Summary-Mobilizing-Resources-for-PVE-June-21\\_Final.pdf](http://www.organizingagainstve.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Meeting-Summary-Mobilizing-Resources-for-PVE-June-21_Final.pdf); Eelco Kessels and Christina Nemr, "Countering Violent Extremism and Development Assistance: Identifying Synergies, Obstacles, and Opportunities," *Global Center on Cooperative Security Policy Brief*, February 2016, <https://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/feb-2016-CVE-and-Development-policy-brief.pdf>.

delivered under the guise of development initiatives.<sup>23</sup> Some in the development community see the merging of development and P/CVE as an opportunity to achieve humanitarian and development objectives, but others are concerned about the implications of addressing development challenges through a P/CVE lens.<sup>24</sup>

Development objectives pursued in this manner, however, are quite different from development objectives carried out through other peace and security means. Development-related peace and security programming agendas tend to concentrate on fostering more effective and accountable formal and informal institutions to address structural conditions and give people the tools to hold governments accountable. For example, justice and security sector development, public sector transparency and accountability, access to justice, and governance reform are premised on the idea that effective, people-oriented institutions responsive to the needs of and accountable to communities are essential for sustainable development outcomes and violence reduction. P/CVE programs, while recognizing these structural and institutional imperatives in theory, attempt to build resilience in communities deemed vulnerable to radicalization to violent extremism.<sup>25</sup> Program interventions such as vocational training, civic engagement education, and messaging and advocacy campaigns countering extremist messaging aim to empower people with tools to reject terrorism.<sup>26</sup> Although potentially contributing to poverty alleviation and other limited developmental gains, P/CVE programming does not appear designed to address the primary structural or institutional sources of development or governance deficits. On the contrary, in the milieu of the heightened securitiza-

tion of otherwise marginalized and predominantly Muslim communities in East Africa and particularly Kenya,<sup>27</sup> such programming may be placing intended beneficiaries at heightened risk of scrutiny and abuse by security forces.

Taking a step back from the P/CVE agenda, the following sections offer a snapshot of the day-to-day challenges facing youth and women in Mombasa based on focus group discussions and supported by additional literature. These discussions are intended to give voice to Mombasa's young people and women struggling to earn a livelihood and address the needs of their communities within an economic and political system that perpetuates their deprivation and marginalization. Solutions to these challenges should not be sought within the remit of the P/CVE agenda but rather in the achievement of fundamental and meaningful changes to that system.

## ECONOMIC WELL-BEING

Over the course of focus group discussions, young people shared their experiences living in economic precarity. Most of Mombasa's young people lack a stable income and struggle to make ends meet in an informal economy where compensation is not always guaranteed. Despite its position as Kenya's second-largest city and eastern Africa's largest port, its economic growth has not kept pace with the country, and its youth unemployment rate has been estimated at more than double the national average.<sup>28</sup> Formal employment opportunities are few and far between, reserved primarily for those with privilege that "know the right people."<sup>29</sup> Most of working age in the county

23 Róisín Hinds, "Role of Development Assistance in Countering Extremism and Terrorism," *GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report*, 26 March 2015, <http://www.gsdrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/HDQ1210.pdf>; Mercy Corps, "Youth and Consequences: Unemployment, Injustice and Violence," 13 February 2015, <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/youth-consequences-unemployment-injustice-and-violence>.

24 Norwegian Refugee Council, "Principles Under Pressure: The Impact of Counterterrorism Measures and Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism on Principled Humanitarian Action," 2018, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/nrc-principles\\_under\\_pressure-report-screen.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/nrc-principles_under_pressure-report-screen.pdf).

25 International Alert and UNDP, "Improving the Impact of Preventing Violent Extremism Programming: A Toolkit for Design, Monitoring and Evaluation," 2018, [http://www.undp.org/content/dam/norway/undp-ogc/documents/PVE\\_ImprovingImpactProgrammingToolkit\\_2018.pdf](http://www.undp.org/content/dam/norway/undp-ogc/documents/PVE_ImprovingImpactProgrammingToolkit_2018.pdf).

26 Hinds, "Role of Development Assistance in Countering Extremism and Terrorism."

27 See Eelco Kessels, Tracey Durner, and Matthew Schwartz, "Violent Extremism and Instability in the Greater Horn of Africa: An Examination of Drivers and Responses," Global Center, April 2016, [https://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/GCCS\\_VIOLENT-EXTREMISM\\_low\\_3.pdf](https://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/GCCS_VIOLENT-EXTREMISM_low_3.pdf).

28 Leanne Rasmussen and Bakari Mohammed Dziwengo, "Employment and Employee Retention in Mombasa's Micro-Retail Sector: Lessons in Promoting Quality of Work," *Kuza*, June 2017, p. 3, [http://ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/---emp\\_ent/---ifp\\_seed/documents/publication/wcms\\_568473.pdf](http://ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/---ifp_seed/documents/publication/wcms_568473.pdf).

29 Hannah Waddilove, "Big Barrier: Youth Unemployment at the Coast," *Rift Valley Institute Meeting Report*, January 2017, p. 2, <http://riftvalley.net/download/file/fid/4487>.

(youth and older workers) make what livelihoods they can in the city's vast informal economy, as *boda boda* drivers, domestic workers, manual laborers, small traders, and charcoal burners, where they suffer from low pay, wage theft, and other forms of exploitation.<sup>30</sup> Prior to the downturn in tourism in 2014, those engaged in seasonal or permanent employment at Mombasa's popular hotels earned low wages under harsh conditions and were prevented from joining trade unions.<sup>31</sup> One young woman from Changamwe explained, "You may earn today, but the next time you will make any other money is a week later. Life does not stop, and this makes it so hard."<sup>32</sup> In discussing the challenge of youth unemployment in Mombasa, participants at a forum in 2017 described how an overwhelming sense of hopelessness, the seeming inability to succeed, and "the perceived imperative of entrepreneurship as integral to the solution of youth unemployment" erode the confidence of young people and exacerbate the unemployment problem.<sup>33</sup>

Free-market entrepreneurialism is a central feature of policy and programming to address poverty and unemployment in Kenya, as it is across most developing countries. Many young people in Mombasa have come to view success in entrepreneurship as the only way to improve their condition and are generally aware of governmental programs to promote youth employment, such as the Youth Enterprise Development Fund (YEDF). Ostensibly designed to promote young people's business ventures by giving them access to credit, those that have applied have often been unsuccessful or know others who similarly failed, citing cumbersome and demanding requirements and an overly complex application procedure. For young people living in poverty, establishing a line of credit or raising a 10 percent deposit for a loan renders these programs completely inaccessible. Revelations of systemic mismanagement, corruption, and

politicization of the YEDF and other governmental youth funds have undermined their legitimacy among young people and called their sustainability and credibility into question.<sup>34</sup>

Young people keenly feel the impact of corruption and are deeply troubled by the ties between politicians and the wealthy business elite. Focus group discussions revealed young people's general disillusion and distrust in the political elite. Many view local political elites as entrepreneurs whose priorities and interests are driven by their own financial interests rather than public welfare. Devolution of political power to the counties had been a source of optimism in restraining corruption, but many focus group participants felt that the County Assembly has failed to perform its oversight role. "When you are elected through bribing voters, then you have no obligation to serve them because you paid them to vote you in," said a young woman from Mvita subcounty.<sup>35</sup> In 2017 the Kenyan Auditor-General's Office found that Mombasa residents pay some of the highest bribes in the country.<sup>36</sup> From a livelihood standpoint, corruption and bribery impose serious economic burdens on poor and working-class people in Mombasa. At the transactional level, bribery can be a serious obstacle to accessing public services ranging from utilities to business registry and licensing and public sector employment, even to receiving YEDF funding.<sup>37</sup> At the societal level, public sector corruption diverts funding from essential programs, services, and infrastructure critical for preparing and supporting young people as they enter the workforce.

Political disillusionment coupled with the economic realities of poverty and unemployment can severely inhibit youth engagement and participation as a proactive force in politics and governance. Focus group participants generally agreed that wealth was one of

30 Kenyan National Council for Population and Development (NCPD), "2015 Kenya National Adolescent and Youth Survey (NAYS): Mombasa County," January 2017, pp. 22–23, <http://www.ncpd.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Mombasa-County-Adolescents-and-Youth-Survey-NAYS.pdf> (hereinafter 2015 NAYS).

31 Mghanga, *Usipoziba Ufa Utajenga Ukuta*, p. 59.

32 Participant, youth focus group discussion, Mombasa, 20 September 2018.

33 Waddilove, "Big Barrier," p. 2.

34 See Maurice Sikenyi, "Does Kenya's Youth Enterprise Development Fund Serve Young People?" *IDS Bulletin* 48, no. 3 (2017): 127–139.

35 Participant, youth focus group discussion, Mombasa, 20 September 2018.

36 Angela Oketch, "Mombasa Residents Pay Highest Bribes in Kenya—Report," *Daily Nation*, 6 February 2017, <https://www.nation.co.ke/news/Mombasa-residents-pay-highest-bribe-in-Kenya-report/1056-3801742-st659u/index.html>.

37 Sikenyi, "Does Kenya's Youth Enterprise Development Fund Serve Young People?" pp. 132–133.

the key factors that can enable or constrain civic engagement and participation in formal avenues of governance. As one focus group participant starkly summarized, “Poor economic status takes away people’s power to influence decisions.”<sup>38</sup> Reflecting a sense of frustration with their disenfranchisement, some participants felt involvement in formal political forums was a waste of time. Indeed, even if they feel that their voices would be heard, poor, underemployed young people have limited time and resources to devote to regular engagement in formal avenues of governance. A recent report on the political participation of youth in eight counties of Kenya found that financial stability affects political participation of youth in many ways, ranging from attendance in public forums to access to information.<sup>39</sup> Employed youth participants that took part in the forums for that report noted that “financial stability enables one to access information and earn respect in the community, something non-working youth don’t enjoy.”<sup>40</sup>

At the same time, participants recognized the intimate connections across socioeconomic status, ethnicity, education, and gender in the accumulation and maintenance of economic and political power. Focus group participants also highlighted “tribalism”; “nepotism based on religion, class, and color”; and gender-based discrimination as significant obstacles to effective political participation. Although Mombasa County may be one of Kenya’s most diverse, its history of ethnic and religious tensions continues to have material consequences through the local patronage politics manifest throughout the country. Reflecting the coastal region’s history of marginalization stemming from the colonial and independence periods, the county’s primary school enrollment is 68 percent, and its rate of transition to secondary school is nearly half

the national average.<sup>41</sup> Few are untouched by the county’s underdevelopment, but the impact on indigenous Muslim communities, as well as women and girls, has been disproportionate.<sup>42</sup> There is a stark contrast in educational attainment between residents from the interior and those indigenous to the coast, a disparity that closely aligns with employment rates and income levels. As one study explains, “The Muslim coastal majority constitute most of the unemployed at the coast ... while the Christian upcountry minority form the more economically privileged inhabitants’. Inequality is clearly structured along ethnic and religious lines, whether measured by land ownership, levels of education, rates of employment or personal wealth.”<sup>43</sup>

## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The focus group discussions suggested that young people in Mombasa are generally aware of local government initiatives taking place in their communities. Public notice boards, suggestion boxes, and radio are among the more accessible means for young people to engage with and stay informed on local governance activities.<sup>44</sup> Yet, they feel they lack the capacity and power to influence local leadership and achieve change. Young people stressed that even when they offer opinions or suggestions for change, their ideas are frequently dismissed or ignored. When opinions offer criticism, one is even more likely to be shut out of the political process. As one young woman from Changamwe explained, “When you oppose an idea by a leader, they see you as a project of the opposition or simply out to scuttle their good work.”<sup>45</sup> Expressing opposition ensures that “your voice will never again be heard in those meetings,” a youth from Likoni said,

38 Participant, youth focus group discussion, Mombasa, 20 September 2018.

39 Carter Center, “Youth and Women’s Consultations on Political Participation in Kenya: Findings and Recommendations,” n.d., p. 27, [https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/peace\\_publications/democracy/kenya-youth-and-women-political-participation-report.pdf](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/peace_publications/democracy/kenya-youth-and-women-political-participation-report.pdf).

40 Ibid.

41 2015 NAYS, p. 14; Benta A. Abuya and Maurice Mutisya, “Why Funding Alone Can’t Shake Up Kenya’s School Transition Rate,” Conversation, 30 May 2018, <https://theconversation.com/why-funding-alone-cant-shake-up-kenyas-school-transition-rate-95443>.

42 Kenyan women and girls face economic, political, and social marginalization across a number of indicators, including the highest rates of unemployment in urban areas. See UNDP, “Discussion Paper: Kenya’s Youth Employment Challenge,” January 2013, p. 33, [http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Poverty%20Reduction/Inclusive%20development/Kenya\\_YEC\\_web\(jan13\).pdf](http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Poverty%20Reduction/Inclusive%20development/Kenya_YEC_web(jan13).pdf).

43 Mungai and Musker, “Mombasa,” p. 14.

44 2015 NAYS, p. 28.

45 Participant, youth focus group discussion, Mombasa, 20 September 2018.

adding that the leaders would hire more vocal supporters to silence the voice of the opponents.<sup>46</sup> In contrast, those who allied themselves under the patronage of “duty bearers” are rewarded with selective information flow and additional opportunities for superficial involvement.

Mombasa’s young people also have a good understanding of the concept of governance and various avenues available to participate in it, including public *barazas* (community meetings), district and local peace committees, *nyumba kumi* (community policing initiative), and project audits. At the same time, young people feel their engagement is often stifled and relegated to formalities, to rubber-stamp decisions made by elected leaders rather than engage them in genuine dialogue. According to a 2018 survey, the sentiment that youth needs are persistently ignored is generally shared by Kenyan young people.<sup>47</sup> Young people’s voices are welcomed as long as they are amenable to the interests of political officeholders or only used to offer legitimacy during campaigns or times of crisis. As one young man from Kisauni explained, “Youth are co-opted into decision-making committees whenever there is crisis. For instance, now that there is a problem with criminal gangs, some of which are run by juveniles, the leaders call us to come and give the way forward on how to handle the gangs.”<sup>48</sup>

Young people in Mombasa feel they do not have access to their leaders or, when they do, they have no capacity to influence what leaders have already decided to do. “Leaders came to meetings when they were already decided on what they wanted to achieve, and no amount of opposition could stop them from pushing their agenda.”<sup>49</sup> For example, in Changamwe, elected officials chose to add low-cost paving stones to the roadway rather than fixing the storm water drain-

age system, which area citizens felt was a more urgent priority directly impacting their health and safety. The government’s National Adolescents and Youth Survey (NAYS) in Mombasa County found that “no mechanisms exist to ensure accountability and transparency” within the county.<sup>50</sup> Participants noted in particular that officeholders elected on the basis of patronage “do not feel they owe the community” or feel the need to serve them. Corruption and bribery are rife in the county. According to the 2017 National Ethics and Corruption Survey, a bribe is demanded 1.61 times per person per year on average in Mombasa County (the national average is 1.57).<sup>51</sup> The survey found the average bribe in the county was roughly \$23, or around a half month’s income for a Kenyan living at the international poverty line, making Mombasa the 27th most corrupt county out of 47.<sup>52</sup> Political officeholders at all levels were described as being under the influence of or directly funded by the wealthy business class and “thus easily forget[ting] their electorate.” Some viewed the leaders of certain grassroots organizations as being in the pockets of the elite as well. The only leaders that held a semblance of young people’s trust and legitimacy were local chiefs and village elders, whom they perceived as more understanding of the needs of the community despite their limited resources and mandate.

Youth participation and trust in governance are further undermined by their relationship with local police, who were unanimously considered the least trusted governmental institution. In 2017 the Kenya Police Service ranked as the second-most bribery-prone institution in East Africa and the most bribery-prone institution within Kenya.<sup>53</sup> Rent-seeking behavior is widespread among officers, and young people cited frequent harassment and intimidation by local police officers without provocation. One youth explained that “some [police] have even turned their vehicle into a kangaroo

46 Participant, youth focus group discussion, Mombasa, 21 September 2018.

47 Leopold Obi, “Young People Perceive Good Governance as ‘Irrelevant,’” *Daily Nation*, 24 November 2018, <https://www.nation.co.ke/news/Youth-good-governance-irrelevant/1056-4866242-2yfxqwz/index.html>.

48 Participant, youth focus group discussion, Mombasa, 20 September 2018.

49 Participant, youth focus group discussion, Mombasa, 21 September 2018.

50 2015 NAYS, p. 28.

51 Kenyan Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission, “National Ethics and Corruption Survey 2017,” *EEAC Research Report*, no. 6 (May 2018), p. 65, <http://www.eacc.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/EACC-ETHICS-AND-CORRUPTION-SURVEY-2017.pdf>.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

53 Transparency International Kenya, Transparency International Rwanda, and Transparency International Uganda, “East African Bribery Index 2017,” 2017, <https://tikenya.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/East-African-Bribery-Index-EABI-2017-1-1.pdf>.

court where they charge you and extort money from you.”<sup>54</sup> Incidences of police tipping off suspects, thereby compromising the safety of people reporting crime, have undermined young people’s willingness to provide officers with information. The Nyumba Kumi community policing program, which arose in response to the seemingly irreparable gap in trust between the people and the police, was widely viewed as a failure by focus group participants. Ultimately, many Mombasan youth are as concerned about police as they are about street criminals: both “wield machetes, walking sticks, guns, and whips” and are dangerous and should be avoided. As some of the most visible manifestations of governmental authority that many people encounter on a daily basis in an urban setting, violence, intimidation, and corruption by police officers not only undermine public safety and public trust in the police but overall trust in the government as well.

Kenyan society can be intensely patriarchal. Women, in particular young women and girls, are subject to a range of social, economic, and political pressures that place them at greater risk of marginalization, poverty, and unemployment. Although they ranked among Kenya’s higher-performing counties in the gender equality index,<sup>55</sup> Mombasan women and girls have fewer opportunities for economic and political empowerment than their male counterparts. Primary school enrollment rates among girls in Mombasa are significantly lower than those of boys, with barely a quarter of the county’s population of girls enrolled in secondary school.<sup>56</sup> Mombasa County has the highest incidence of gender-based violence in the coastal region.<sup>57</sup> Kenyan women in the workforce tend to have lower-quality jobs and receive far less in remuneration than the average male worker.<sup>58</sup> Focus group participants described how poor and working-class women have been conditioned and intimidated into subordinate status in political life. They stressed that cultural biases that view women as weak, “trouble-making opponents,” and “poor leaders” under-

mine their confidence to engage in matters of governance and participate in public life.

Despite the hindrances to their political participation, young people and women are aware of the problems facing their communities and are well placed to provide solutions and alternative approaches. One such example is the Mombasa Youth Assembly, a platform established by local young people to empower each other, with an emphasis on promoting good governance, improving service delivery, and enhancing public participation. The assembly organizes activities with relevant stakeholders to address problems facing youth within the county. Other youth-led groups, such as Dream Achievers, Manyatta Youth Group, and Kwacha Afrika, employ the arts to communicate and raise awareness on the effects of violence and corruption. Groups such as these not only create spaces where youth can safely express themselves but also serve to curb youth participation in crime and violence. In the areas where youth are engaged and empowered, the levels of crimes were low compared to where there were no mechanisms or platforms to make youth voices heard.

## CONCLUSION

The serious threat posed by al-Shabaab cannot be ignored, but the overriding drive to prevent violent extremism among Kenyan youth, especially in Muslim and Somali communities, threatens to undermine human rights and civil liberties and stigmatize already marginalized groups and may threaten to overshadow the pressing need for economic and governance accountability and reform. Viewing disempowered and marginalized populations primarily through a P/CVE lens raises a number of concerns. Is the P/CVE paradigm the most appropriate framework through which to understand and pursue the alleviation of challenges such as poverty and unemployment? Should all people have equal access to basic goods, services, resources, and legal protections that

54 Participant, youth focus group discussion, Mombasa, 20 September 2018.

55 Kenyan National Gender and Equality Commission (NGEC), “Status of Equality and Inclusion in Kenya,” 2016, pp. 200–201, <https://www.ngeckenya.org/Downloads/Status%20of%20Equality%20and%20Inclusion%20in%20Kenya.pdf>.

56 Kenyan Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, “2014 Basic Education Statistical Booklet,” 2014, pp. 44, 88, <https://kicd.ac.ke/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/2014-Basic-Education-Statistical-Booklet.pdf>.

57 Brian Osweta, “Mombasa Leading in Gender Based Violence at the Coast,” Baraka FM, 4 April 2017, <http://barakafm.org/2017/04/04/mombasa-leading-in-gender-based-violence-at-the-coast/>.

58 NGEC, “Status of Equality and Inclusion in Kenya,” p. 134.

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underpin human dignity on the basis of citizenship, or should these basic entitlements be reserved for only those populations that have been deemed vulnerable to violent extremism? The principles of governance elaborated in the Kenyan Constitution include democracy and participation of the people; human dignity, equity, social justice, inclusiveness, equality, human rights, nondiscrimination, and protection of the marginalized; good governance, integrity, transparency, and accountability; and sustainable development.<sup>59</sup> It states that all Kenyans are entitled to decent education, housing, and health care;<sup>60</sup> full participation in economic, political, and social life; and equal protection under the law.<sup>61</sup> Youth and women are among the groups explicitly designated for protection.<sup>62</sup>

Yet, young people and women face numerous obstacles to achieving equity in Kenya's economy and governance. An individual's ability to participate in formal political institutions is predicated at least in part on relative economic stability and social inclusion. This has proven elusive to poor and working-class young people and women in Mombasa. Kenya's reliance on the free market as the basis for economic development is based on the assumption that entrepreneurship promotion, private enterprise, and private profit will produce public prosperity. This economic system has primarily served the interests of a narrow political and economic elite and has not succeeded in meeting the needs of the larger population. Poor and working-class young people and women in Mombasa that attempt to leverage opportunities to participate in local governance find themselves tokenized and co-opted within formal political institutions run on the power of patrimony. Their voices are welcomed inasmuch as they are amenable to the interests of local officeholders or offer superficial legitimacy during a crisis or campaign. They have lit-

tle confidence that they can achieve meaningful change beneficial to their communities through formal political participation. Kenya's economic system and patriarchal political culture, coupled with connections to desirable ethnic and business networks, favor the ascendance of wealthy males to political and economic dominance. Poor and working-class women face multiple dimensions of oppression in this system and are devalued by the political elite and socioculturally disciplined to refrain from leadership and political activism.

The focus group discussions highlight that the most pressing needs of the community in Mombasa are ultimately socioeconomic concerns: employment, livelihood security, access to education and health care, and safe neighborhoods. Although widely understood as drivers of violent extremism in the P/CVE discourse, these concerns cannot be addressed without fundamental changes in governance and development policy and the full realization of principles enumerated in the Kenyan Constitution. For now, however, grassroots-level organizing outside formal avenues of governance may be the most productive method of empowering communities to develop solutions to address their immediate needs. Of course, these challenges are by no means unique to Kenya or to low-income countries. Ultimately, human security, justice, and jobs are essential components of sustainable development worthy of pursuit on their own merit, not only improving the lives and livelihoods of communities but also with them a corresponding reductions in drivers of violence. For meaningful change to take place, political elites must be willing to adopt serious measures to address socioeconomic and political challenges on the basis of inclusive, accountable, people-oriented development and governance initiatives. Otherwise, there is little expectation that they will do so under the rubric of P/CVE.

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59 Constitution of Kenya, ch. II, § 10(2).

60 Ibid., ch. IV, § 43.

61 Ibid., ch. IV, § 27.

62 Ibid., ch. IV, §§ 21(3), 55.

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