

Check Against Delivery

Remarks at the United Nations African Regional High-Level Conference on Counter-Terrorism and the Prevention of Violent Extremism Conducive to Terrorism

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Chairs, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you to the Government of the Republic of Kenya and the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism for hosting this important regional conference.

The Global Center on Cooperative Security has been working on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) efforts since our founding fifteen years ago. As a not for profit organization with a global network of partners, we advance inclusive responses to complex security challenges across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. This includes P/CVE-specific initiatives, but also work in related areas of criminal justice and rule of law, financial integrity and inclusion, and multilateral security policy.

It is encouraging to note that youth are not being discussed merely as a liability, vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment to violent extremism, but as critical and active partners bolstering community resilience and advancing P/CVE objectives. However, more progress can and must be made.

Based on our extensive experience partnering with youth leaders, human rights and gender advocates, and civil society organizations across the African continent, some of which are in the room today and many who are not, I wish to highlight three key areas where governments and international organizations like the United Nations can better engage with youth as leaders in preventing and countering violent extremism.

1. We need to address all forms of insecurity and inequality experienced by youth

There are diverse perspectives on insecurity in Africa. Some communities have suffered under extensive terrorist violence with devastating loss of life. In others, resource and land conflicts, inter- and intra-communal violence, gender-based violence, criminality, and gang violence are often more pressing security concerns than terrorism.

When communities feel unprotected from these forms of violence, it exacerbates grievances of marginalization and can lead to violent reactions, such as the creation of “self-defense” groups that are vulnerable to radicalization or co-option into alliances with terrorist organizations. This contributes to protracted local conflict and displacement, with escalating consequences for African youth.

We need to consider all aspects of human security when determining where and how P/CVE programming makes sense and is appropriate. P/CVE investments need to align with the actual threat of radicalization to violent extremism experienced by youth in each country, rather than focus on perceptions of the vulnerability of youth as a whole.

However, security from violence is only one aspect of human security priorities for youth. Quite commonly, joblessness and economic marginalization are more pressing concerns. Youth highlight a sense of economic precariousness derived from low engagement in, or access to, formal employment opportunities.

Success in entrepreneurship is increasingly seen as the most viable way for African youth to improve their condition. Recognizing this, the Global Center partners with several youth-led organizations in northeast Nigeria that are working to support economic mobility of youth, and especially women and girls, by providing financial literacy training and business development mentorships.

It is critical that opportunities for socioeconomic mobility are shared equally across all segments of society – otherwise, it may have the opposite effect of exacerbating unmet expectations. Further, P/CVE investments should not come at the expense of addressing other forms of violence, instability, or socioeconomic and governance challenges. In fact, P/CVE in many cases may not be the most appropriate or productive lens through which to address some of the conditions that may yield youth vulnerable to violent extremism.

2. We need to build on and leverage the existing expertise of youth

Young people are key agents in driving peace and stability within their communities across Africa; we need to recognize, build upon, and leverage their vast knowledge and experiences in this regard. Facilitating exchanges of youth leaders within and across regions is key to maximizing networking and sustaining locally owned solutions to insecurity, including violent extremism.

Youth exchanges should be focused and targeted, moving beyond broad discussion to facilitate advanced dialogue and learning on specific areas within the P/CVE field. For instance, the Global Center facilitates peer expert exchanges between Kenyan and Nigerian youth organizations, focused on topics such as trauma and reconciliation, trust building, alternatives to violence, strategic communications, and community resilience. Exchanges have also explored the type of change youth leaders are trying to achieve in their communities; for example, providing effective awareness raising strategies, fostering multi-stakeholder dialogue and trust, or delivering skill-based trainings.

Youth leaders describe a lack of opportunities for professional development in relation to leadership and organizational management. These skills are critical to sustained and impactful programming and vibrant civil societies. To address this, we also provide training on core organizational competencies like grant writing, project design, monitoring and evaluation, and budgeting and accounting to contribute to sustained effectiveness of youth-led programming.

Governments and other donors should be flexible and less risk averse in letting youth organizations test new concepts and ideas. Private sector companies, philanthropic entities, and other international partners may be able to play a greater role in this regard as well. For example, organizations like the

Global Center and the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund provide small grants to youth leaders for innovative and pilot programming in East and West Africa.

3. We need to create sustained and meaningful partnerships with youth

To achieve their full potential in sustaining peace and security, youth will need support from a number of partners. Local and national government authorities can create platforms for dialogue, facilitate policy change to meet youth needs, and foster the future generation of political and social leaders. For instance, young people and civil society organizations should play an important role in the development, rollout, and evaluation of national P/CVE strategies and resulting programs.

Yet, as commonly noted among various countries, a significant trust deficit exists between government, civil society, and communities, especially among youth populations who feel they have experienced injustice at the hands of the state. This is a significant barrier that requires conflict-sensitive and “do no harm” responses at the community and institutional governance levels.

Building strong partnerships also requires recognizing that youth are not a homogenous entity with a singular common experience. Young women and men face different realities that come with unique fears and concerns; as do those from different ethnic and religious backgrounds as well as those living in urban versus rural environments. We need a more inclusive and diverse set of perspectives to protect against bias in the understanding of violent extremism that hinders the effectiveness of P/CVE efforts.

Engaging youth in P/CVE policy must go beyond giving them a seat at the table. Engagement needs to involve meaningful exchanges that influence the strategic design and objectives of policy, which in turn must translate into actions by government and non-governmental actors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, youth represent one of the most critical actors in the fight against violent extremism – and more broadly in the establishment of peaceful, vibrant, and resilient communities. They are the most targeted and commonly identified as vulnerable, but are among the most vital partners in addressing radicalization to violent extremism. The Global Center appreciates the opportunity to share the perspectives of our dynamic youth partners with this esteemed audience. Thank you.
