



**JOINT UNITED NATIONS - UAE REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR
ARAB LEAGUE COUNTRIES
EMPOWERING YOUTH AND PROMOTING TOLERANCE: PRACTICAL APPROACHES
TO PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM CONDUCTIVE TO
TERRORISM**

18-19 December 2019
Abu Dhabi, UAE

Civil Society Workshop Findings and Recommendations

The United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), with support from the Global Center on Cooperative Security (Global Center) and Hedayah, organized a civil society workshop in advance of the United Nations – United Arab Emirates Regional Conference for Arab League Countries on “Empowering Youth and Promoting Tolerance: Practical Approaches to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Conducive to Terrorism” on 17 December 2019 in Abu Dhabi.

The one-day workshop for civil society representatives provided a dedicated opportunity for participating civil society actors to reflect on their experiences in relation to empowering youth and promoting tolerance in efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism conducive to terrorism. Participants included youth leaders, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders from Arab League member states and beyond. The goal of the civil-society led-workshop was to facilitate perspectives from the field, ensuring different voices from civil society and other local actors are heard, and to facilitate collaboration and cooperation among civil society organizations working on a range of issues in different national and regional settings.

It was intended to inform the United Nations – United Arab Emirates Regional Conference for Arab League Countries and contribute to a series of finding and recommendations on civil society engagement to be presented during the United Nations High-Level Counter-Terrorism Week on 1-2 July 2020.

The civil society participants welcomed their inclusion in the regional conference and the dedicated civil society pre-workshop. They noted that it is encouraging that youth are not being discussed merely as a liability, vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment to violent extremism, but as critical and active partners that advance objectives aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). Indeed, in these roles, youth are championing alternatives to violence, building community resilience, developing strategic communications, and facilitating trauma healing and reconciliation, among other contributions.

The participating civil society actors represented extensive experience promoting tolerance and partnering with youth leaders, human rights and gender advocates across the Arab League region. They highlight four key areas where governments and international organizations like the United

Nations can better engage civil society to empower youth and promote tolerance in preventing and countering violent extremism.

1. Address all forms of insecurity and inequality experienced by youth

- There are diverse perspectives on insecurity among communities in Arab League member states and among the participating civil society representatives. Some communities have suffered extensive terrorist violence with devastating loss of life. In others, sectarianism, government corruption, and unemployment are more pressing concerns. When communities feel victims of these and other concerns, it can exacerbate grievances of marginalization and can lead to violent reactions. Furthermore, such insecurities and grievances are effectively used by terrorist organizations in their recruitment and communications efforts.
- Participants stressed that all aspects of human security need to be considered 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 on perceptions of the vulnerability of youth as a whole.
- Participants noted that security from violence or violent extremism, however, may not always be the most pressing priority of youth. Quite commonly, corruption, joblessness, and economic marginalization are more important issues in the daily lives of young people. Participants noted that a sense of economic precariousness derives for many youth from low engagement in, or access to, formal employment opportunities. It is critical that opportunities for socioeconomic mobility are shared equally across all segments of society.
- Participants welcomed additional P/CVE investments, but noted that those should not come at the expense of addressing other forms of violence, instability, and socioeconomic and governance challenges. They noted that these issues may, in fact contribute to youth vulnerable to violent extremism, but that “P/CVE” may not be the most appropriate or productive lens through which to address them.

2. Support the role of civil society in promoting dialogue, mutual understanding, tolerance and peaceful co-existence

- To promote tolerance among peoples and nations, participants stressed the need to ensure that measures taken in the fight against terrorism do not discriminate, in purpose or effect, on the grounds of race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin and that non-citizens are not subjected to racial or ethnic profiling or stereotyping.
- Participants shared that experience to date has shown that understanding local communities helps preventing violent extremism. They stressed the need to engage and support grassroots organizations in efforts to build cohesion within communities. The more opportunities for dialogue, and for different groups to develop mutual understanding with one another, the greater the chance that trust, tolerance, and respect for diversity will flourish.

- Civil society actors can be well placed to lead efforts to promote dialogue and understanding, including interreligious and interfaith dialogue, through the fostering of exchanges and quality education at different levels of society that advance human rights and tolerance.
- Participants highlighted the role that civil society actors can play, along with the media, in supporting responsible public engagement on terrorism-related issues and in promoting tolerance, cultural diversity and non-discrimination.

3. Build capacity and leverage the existing expertise of civil society to empower youth and promote tolerance

- Young people and CSOs promoting tolerance are key agents in supporting peace and stability within their communities. Participant stressed the need to recognize, build on and leverage their vast knowledge and experiences in this regard.
- Civil society and community-based groups need resources to promote tolerance and empower youth to prevent and counter violent extremism. It is important that civil society actors receive consistent funding to continue their work. Building capacity and facilitating exchanges of youth leaders and CSOs within and across regions can help networking and sustaining locally owned solutions to insecurity, including violent extremism. Exchanges should be focused and targeted, moving beyond broad discussion to facilitate advanced dialogue and learning on specific areas within the P/CVE field. Exchanges have also focused on 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, enhancing inter- and intra- community and faith tolerance, or delivering skill-based trainings.
- Civil society representatives and youth leaders also described the need to support the broader organizational capacities of CSO working to empower youth and promote tolerance. The organizations need critical management and organizational skills to sustain an impactful programming and vibrant civil societies. They require training and resources for core organizational costs and competencies like grant writing, project design, monitoring and evaluation, and budgeting and accounting to contribute to sustained effectiveness of youth-led and tolerance-focused programming.
- The participants urged governments and other donors to be flexible and less risk averse in letting youth organizations and CSOs promoting tolerance to 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.

4. Create sustained and meaningful partnerships with civil society to empower youth and promote tolerance

- Merely talking about civil society and youth-led organizations or inviting them to the table is not enough. 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.
- To achieve their full potential in sustaining peace and security, civil society and youth-led organizations need support from a number of partners. Local and national government authorities, as well as intergovernmental bodies, 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 can play an important role in the development, rollout, and evaluation of national P/CVE strategies and resulting programs.
- Yet, as commonly noted among the participants, 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. Indeed, youth are often treated as a “problem to be solved,” or, worse even, as the threat that should be mitigated. This is a significant barrier that requires “do no harm” responses at the community and institutional governance levels that address the lack of trust between youth and governments.
- Building strong partnerships also requires recognizing that civil society and youth are not homogenous entities with singular experiences. 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. Participants highlighted the need for 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.