

COMMUNIQUE

THE FIRST SOUTHERN VOICES NETWORK FOR PEACEBUILDING (SVNP) EASTERN AFRICA POLICY CONFERENCE

7-8 DECEMBER 2020 AT CROWNE PLAZA HOTEL,

NAIROBI, KENYA.

Theme: Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in the COVID-19 Era

Preamble

As terrorism mutates in Africa, there is need for coordinated efforts at the level of research, policy and practice in order to formulate working regional interventions that put into consideration changing dynamics occasioned by corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19). COVID-19 is rapidly creating an enabling environment for luring and targeting unsuspecting users into radicalization and violent extremism more aggressively owing to the increased level of exposure and time spent on social media platforms in the context of lockdown measures in countries in East Africa. Research and policy direction, as well as practical interventions, should be re-oriented towards supporting key pillars of Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) pillars of the National/Regional Strategies that support and set realistic goals that are going to reduce the impacts of terrorism in East Africa in the short term and counter other systemic and structural factors that are responsible for extremism in the long term. To this end, the African Technology Policy Studies Network (ATPS) hosted the first-ever **Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding (SVNP) Eastern Africa Policy Conference** on the 7-8 November 2020 in Nairobi, Kenya. This conference was organized by various partners including the Wilson Center-USA, Centre for Democracy Peace and security (CMDPS)- Rongo University-Kenya, University of Rwanda, Women International Peace Center-Uganda, Addis Ababa University-Ethiopia and Institute of Policy Analysis and Research-Rwanda.

The delegates observed that:

- The issues of violent extremism and radicalization have been a major issue in the East African Region. This has grown to even cross border sites not traditionally known for recruitment. The emerging new sites include Migori in Kenya where extremist groups are targeting to recruit new members. There have been complaints by parents about teenagers joining strange groups and disappearing for certain periods or even calling themselves strange names characteristics of children becoming recruited or radicalized.
- Religious literacy is a major issue- Misinterpretation of Religious teachings is very common and the Clergy have a big role to play to prevent this. Extreme religious ideologies need to be addressed through Inter-faith dialogue groups. The action plans need to involve all actors on the ground such as opinion leaders, bloggers, business people etc.
- Introduction of recruits to the organizations is done by friends, peers and some religious leaders. In some countries where the authority is extremist groups, the youth are easily recruited as they deem joining the groups to be similar to joining the police or the army.

- Gender issues are also critical. Youth vulnerability is given especially with the emergence of social media and the internet where they have access to everything and anything they are looking for. When youth are not taken care of, this becomes a serious societal problem. Young women/girls have also been involved in violent extremism are perpetrators or as victims and their participation cannot be underestimated/overemphasized.
- Increased access to the internet has exposed youth to increased access to content that may lead to self-radicalization or has made access to negative influence from elsewhere very easy.
- Low education level/ illiteracy has been noted to have contributed to high levels of radicalization and recruitment to the extremist groups. It was also noted that the highly educated people are also involved in violent extremism as was the case in Garissa University in Kenya.
- There is not enough data or research conducted to provide accurate facts and figures. Research needs to be conducted to ascertain some of the assumptions made regarding radicalization and recruitment, especially in this COVID-19 Era. The pandemic has not stopped terrorism. In fact, it has increased in Somalia.
- Conspiracy theories have emerged around COVID-19. Such as allegations that COVID-19 is a biological weapon and/or can be modified to be used as a weapon. Lockdowns and curfews have been used to the advantage of terrorist to recruit or strengthen their presence on the ground in certain areas/countries. However, data is still required to prove these.
- Trust in the security/government systems connects with the speed of recruitment. It is also important to work with the community to bridge the trust deficit. Overreaction by the government affects the confidence of the people on the government especially with regard to COVID-19. COVID 19 has created divided attention with very little attention being given to counter violent extremism.
- No single driver can be attributed to a particular terrorist act. There is usually a combination of factors that drive violent extremism. Marginalization (both perceived or real) has made the youth or people feel neglected by government (Regional marginalization). Poverty/Unemployment-Desperation and hopelessness causes youth to be drawn with a promise of economic benefits. Adventurous spirit-Trying new things especially among the youth has also been cited as a driver.
- Corruption has been cited as one of the key drivers of terrorism, especially at the border points.
- Poor understanding of terrorism and extremism by the national institutions is also a major impediment in the fight against terrorism.
- Technology can be used to fight or promote terrorism or violent extremism depending on how it is used.

The delegates resolved that:

- There is need to consider social media literacy programmes to educate the youth not to be easily lured through social media which is highly accessible nowadays. It is important to harness the potential of technology, youth, and youth language through social media literacy programmes using online and offline digital peacebuilding infrastructures. The governments need to use social media to plug in and convey useful messages.

- There is need for African scholars, practitioners and cyber-citizens to construct pan-African narratives and discourses of resilience when representing terrorism through imbibing African philosophies of Utu (humanity), Umoja (Unity) and Harambee (collective responsibility).
- There is need to eliminate grounds for radicalization by providing opportunities for the youth. The “Kazi Kwa Vijana” programme in Kenya has helped cushion youth from the economic mess caused by the pandemic. But will it continue beyond the COVID-19 period? Use incubation hubs /digital hubs to keep the youth occupied in the development of useful innovations.
- Introduction of Youth programmes/Youth service as a requirement before being allowed to proceed with personal goals. This would entrench patriotism amongst the youth and provide them with extra technical skills therefore further empowering them. Women also need to be brought into the dialogue given their role in either promoting or combating terrorism.
- Need to encourage the provision of social amenities such as playing grounds, swimming pools, gyms and recreational centers that will keep the youth occupied.
- There is need to consider all possibilities and that anything is possible and not just focus on the hotspots (Traditional recruitment hot spots). Take all issues seriously and not as potential threats. Need to not only focus on the hot spots in the fight against violent extremism but also look at the emerging sites when designing programmes aimed at curbing terrorism.
- Terrorism knows no boundaries and a good example is the case of Mozambique where some Kenyans have been implicated. There is need to have concerted efforts across the region and work together in counter-terrorism and prevention & countering violent extremism.
- Need to design programmes within the spectrum of the speed of recruitment as well as consider the soft approach to combating violent extremism. This may include mediation where all involved are brought together to dialogue and resolve issues.
- Consider regulating religious groups in a way that does not infringe on their fundamental rights of worship for example by pre-approving sermons.
- Need for continuous research to clearly understand violent extremism. Information is critical. Revamp and revise the nature of research and how it is disseminated. A deeper understanding of online recruitment is required. This can only be provided through in-depth research.
- How do we narrow the trust deficit? Community policing such as “*Nyumba Kumi Initiative*” in Kenya, “*Ujamaa*” in Tanzania, “*Ubuntu*” in South Africa etc. are highly encouraged.
- Develop monitoring and evaluation systems that can be used to measure progress as well as share results of interventions. These can also be used to measure policy impact.
- Harmonize legal frameworks in the region as well as strengthen national capacities holistically targeting all stakeholders. It is important to continue to collaborate and share information in fighting terrorism. It is not a fight for one country. There is need to innovate and make sure the strategies used by the governments are superior to those of terrorists who also employ their tactics.

Appreciation:

Delegates expressed their appreciation to ATPS and partners for organizing and hosting the very first ever SVNPN conference.