

# Engaging Civil Society in the Prevention of Violent Extremism

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## [From counter terrorism to the prevention of violent extremism: just semantic?](#)

In the wake of 9/11, the slew of anti-terrorism laws and measures has greatly affected the political and operational space of civil society, impacting its role as peacebuilder, protector of human rights, and provider of humanitarian action and development writ large. This has been mainly due to the fact that counter terrorism by its very nature is based on the notion of *isolation and exclusion*: of designation of persons and organizations on terrorist lists, and of denying them mobility, access to financing and a safe haven. A military- and intelligence-driven approach that follows the paradigm of isolation does not allow space for more nuanced action: space for civil society actors to criticize those in power and to build bridges between opposing parties.

Towards the end of the last decade, the introduction of countering violent extremism (CVE) was much more than just a relabelling of the counter terrorism grammar. It opened the door for a more inclusive approach in which civil society could play a role in clarifying and addressing the root causes of violent extremism in a non-coercive manner, promoting and facilitating dialogue with groups 'at risk' (those not yet recruited by terrorist groups but sensitive and supportive of some elements of their ideology). The instrumentalization of NGOs by and for security-driven policies started becoming an important issue, with the legitimacy and autonomy of many civil society actors entering the CVE domain now at stake.

At the beginning of this year, the UN introduced its PVE (Prevention of Violent Extremism) Plan of Action<sup>1</sup>. It was widely welcomed, though it has not yet been formally approved within the UN. This PVE plan is an appeal to all bodies of the UN to put on a violent extremism lens in order make an effort, through their work, to prevent processes of radicalization and recruitment into violent extremism at a very early stage. It is also an acknowledgement of the notion that many different root causes and grievances can collectively add up to violent extremist behaviour and possibly lead to terrorism. It is a Human Security, multi-disciplinary-domain approach, where justice, human rights, development, education, conflict transformation, peacebuilding and rule of law intersect in order to enable an environment that can truly prevent the turn to violent extremism. It is a domain where civil society together with its traditional UN partners have an extensive track record and vast experience, and where they have proven to be most relevant and legitimate. But it is important to keep in mind that the main goal and agenda of these entities and disciplines is to bring about prosperous, peaceful and just societies with a well-functioning rule of law. The ultimate goal could never be to prevent violent extremism. At best it is a positive side effect of joint developmental, educational, humanitarian and human rights efforts. It is important to mention that after years of struggling with the issue, UNDP has taken the lead in developing national PVE actions plans<sup>2</sup>, motivated by the fact

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.undp.org/content/dam/norway/undp-ogc/documents/PVE%20special%20news%20update%20of%20GP%20cluster.pdf>

that violent extremism has a devastating influence on development in all countries, but disproportionately in developing countries.

### Is there a role to play for CS in CVE/PVE?

It is problematic that, from a security perspective, civil society is often approached as a single sector. As an example, regulators define formalized and registered civil society organizations as just NPOs (not-for-profit organizations), whereas civil society itself emphasizes the diversity of positions, constituencies, agendas, strategies and degrees of organizational in the 'sector', making it impossible to frame it all under the same banner. In order to avoid disproportionate regulatory measures and/or overregulation, civil society has been advocating for a risk-based analysis of the sector and specific measures for subsets of civil society organizations where certain risks are at stake.

Civil society can definitely play a role in the prevention and also the countering of violent extremism. In general, we could say that the closer civil society is to the groups at risk to radicalization and recruitment, the more effective it can be, due to not only the depth of knowledge, the experience and the relationships built, but also the credibility and legitimacy it engenders. But counter terrorism laws and measures create obstacles for civil society organizations (CSOs) to get close to the heart of the matter. At the same time, security agendas and security policies tend to instrumentalize civil society actors in order to gather information and implement state-centric security interventions. When, for example, there is a substantial support base for groups that are labelled violent extremist or terrorist (as for instance in Mali), the risk that CSOs face while working on PVE, which is seen as part of a state-centric or international security agenda, is high. But when there is a common notion of 'the enemy/ the criminal group', as for instance in the case of Boko Haram in north-east Nigeria, then most parts of civil society are willing to cooperate, even with a partner who is not trusted – in this case, the Nigerian government.

The security agenda is seldom made explicit when it comes to planning a PVE strategy. There is a tacit understanding of a common acceptance of labelling of terms such as 'terrorist', 'terrorist organizations' and their acts, and very little in-depth research done to identify the root causes and underlying grievances in a local setting that may lead to radicalization and, finally, to recruitment into a terrorist organization. In 'ungoverned areas', especially, as for instance in the Sahel region, where governments have historically failed to put in place governance that brings about citizenship, development, security and justice for all, and where informal actors involved in illicit trade and criminal actions call the shots, it is impossible to imagine one single notion of security. Here it is important that civil society plays a role in redefining security agendas, in fostering dialogue between communities and security stakeholders (both formal and informal ones), and in working with the notion of a diversity of security agendas that create a myriad of options that need to be negotiated and developed into practical security strategies. Both the concept of Human Security and the process of developing a national PVE plan of action can be beneficial for defining practical security strategies.

The Human Security approach is helpful in redefining security: from being more state-centric to becoming more human-centric. It deals with security dimensions that go beyond just the aspects of physical security, considering employment, food, health, political and community security and putting freedom for fear and want, and freedom to live in dignity centre stage.

The process of developing a PVE plan of action can provide an entry point to engage civil society in the development of a national security strategy which could potentially be positive when the engagement:

- is based on principles of partnership and mutual ownership
- is a long-term process, in which trust building, conflict transformation and reconciliation are central
- enables conditions of safety and respect, provided and safeguarded for by the international community
- is multi-stakeholder, meaning that it allows for a variety in actors, both across government and across civil society
- enables the analysis of root causes and grievances, and the push and pull factors of radicalization – made collectively and dealing with different views and understandings, and progressively building up to a shared vision

### Why is the counter terrorism domain problematic for civil society?

There are various reasons why the engagement of civil society in countering terrorism is problematic.

- As mentioned at the beginning, counter terrorism is based on the notion of isolation and exclusion. It seeks to identify those who have committed or have the intention to commit terrorist acts as well as those who support these acts in material and immaterial ways. After identification, isolation can take place in physical, legal and financial terms. This is problematic for civil society in many ways. First, civil society seeks inclusion by participation and uses argumentation and dialogue as tools to strive for conflict transformation, instead of solely turning to law enforcement. Secondly, civil society itself has in many cases had its operational and political space restricted by counter terrorism measures. This is due to the fact that civil society might take critical positions against those in power, including reaching out to those parts of society where there is a support base for terrorism.
- Counter terrorism is a zero-tolerance approach. It does not allow for mistakes and trial-and-error. In the dynamic of conflict transformation and social construction in which civil society operates, it is impossible to work with this zero-tolerance notion. Pilots, trial-and-error, the enabling environment for dialogue and inclusion, and seeking for continuous improvement of performance are common practices. The zero-tolerance approach and the severe legal consequences of trespassing barriers have led to risk averseness of in the first place INGOs, bound to follow international rules and highly vulnerable to reputational damage, but, in the second place also of private financial sector and governmental institutions like banks and their regulators, making 'risky' actors and their activities un-bankable. One of the direct consequences here is that entities hit by de-risking are turning to underground banking and informal cash-transfers, which in itself adds to risks of criminal and terrorism financing. This is a clear example of how counter terrorism measures can become counterproductive.
- The use of classified information and the lack of transparency in terms of the sources of information held by intelligence agents and law enforcers obstruct the creation of a level playing field and true partnership between civil society and the security sector. National administrative regulation requires formal civil society actors to be fully transparent on their sources and strategies. Civil society also has a moral obligation to be as transparent and open as possible.
- Counter terrorism is a targeted approach that needs to provide results in the short term. Addressing the root causes of terrorism through political processes, changes in power structures and the building of comprehensive processes that include preventive and repressive elements, are all long term and clearly not the focus of the average counter terrorism policy.

