**What's New and What's Next in Preventing Youth Violent Extremism**

**June 6, 2018**

**Summary of Small Group Discussions**

**Overview of the Event**
On Wednesday, June 6, 2018, FHI 360 convened a half-day event for policymakers, implementing organizations, researchers, academics and donors to discuss new and emerging approaches in preventing youth, and youth preventing, violent extremism. More than 60 participants joined the event in Washington, D.C. which featured an expert panel discussion that was webcast for a global audience. Following the expert panel, participants broke into small groups for discussions on key themes related to preventing violent extremism (PVE). The notes below largely represent a summary of the small group discussions.

During the expert panel, four practitioners and researchers described their latest contributions to the youth preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) space. The panelists included:

**Kyle Dietrich, Equal Access**: Reframing and Reorienting Radicalization
**Joseph Sany, FHI 360:** Youth Preventing Violent Extremism: Applying Positive Youth Development Approaches
**Lauren Van Metre, George Washington University:** Resilience and Risk: How Youth in Mombasa, Kenya Engage with Violent Extremist Messaging
**Dean Piedmont, The Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism Initiative:** Radicalization, Resilience and Reintegration: Youth in an Era of Violent Extremism

The panel presentations and Q&A video recording can be found on FHI 360's [YouTube channel](YouTube channel):

The six small group discussions that followed the panel were each led by an expert facilitator and covered one of the following topics:
- Reframing and reorienting radicalization
- Reintegration and rehabilitation of foreign terrorist fighters
- Youth-led initiatives to address violent extremism
- Youth resilience
- Social media and alternative messaging
- Engaging parents and other influencers

Below we provide detailed notes from each small group discussion:

**Reframing and Reorienting Radicalization**

**Facilitator:** Jesse Morton, Parallel Networks
*Key take-aways:* As with many terms in the P/CVE arena, there is little agreement on the definition of radicalization. What is clear is the need to move away from more securitized interpretations of radicalization. In terms of recommendations for interventions/research, it is

important to consider how VE groups radicalize youth in a holistic manner, and then develop alternative ecosystems that mirror these approaches.

## What's New: Other New Approaches or Learning

- Asset-based approaches are being discussed and applied. Some noted that these seem like more of a development concept, rather than a CVE approach.
- It is a very new idea for youth to have a voice about anything in a lot of cultures in the world, although the point was made that there have been movements started by youth, like the Arab Spring revolutions.
- A lot of the impetus for youth to join groups is centered around their inability to gain merit as adults. Some youth see joining these VE groups as a way to gain this merit.
- The correlation between state repression and rising trends in VE provides a platform for discussion with governments. If they keep repressing these youth, it will continue to be an issue.
- There are often similar structures in recruitment by violent extremist organizations (VEOs) to that of military recruitment in the U.S. There is a common emphasis on resiliency and boot camps to weed out the weak. However, there is often an overemphasis on recruitment. It is not hard to recruit, but it is hard to keep them once they are in.
- It is important to set up offline and online networks that integrate alternative messages to interact with youth--this is a way to set up an ecosystem that youth can become a part of. It is an alternative and comprehensive parallel structure that counters the structure set up by VE groups. This is being implemented now in Nigeria.

## What's Next: Recommended Research or Interventions to Test and Adopt

- There is a need for reorienting mainly around the security-centric definitions and concepts of radicalization. There is currently no agreed upon definition of radicalization. There are different views/definitions on the different sides of the spectrum.
- There is agreement that governments need to be engaged; youth-led movements directed at changing government policies is a way to engage government and also empower youth.
- We need to help structure other more positive movements that have the same structure and do the same thing, but with a different approach.
- Creating an alternative ecosystems approach might be a next step. Countering extremism is problematic because it reacts to something and categorizes the issues in order to address them. However, joining a group is more complex than just one issue, so what do you counter?
- Empirically, what we have seen in de-radicalization is engagement with "the other."
- Some VEOs are holistic in what they offer - social acceptance, merit, marriage, etc.
- One area that is not discussed is governance. However, the literature on CVE does point to this issue, so it seems like something that should be focused more on. More focus should be put on the state, but it is not necessarily easy, which is why focus is then shifted to other areas. We should be finding ways to push for more stable governance.
- There are gaps in mapping the community and seeing how trends are shaped by the environment.

- Violence morphs/changes/adapts, and we need better ways to track how violence changes. Lots of former disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs did not track the participants afterwards, and those who are violent now are often children of the participants from these programs.

**Risks and Caveats: Risks and Possible Mitigating Factors**
- How do you deconstruct the problem set to create an effective or efficient program?
- The challenge is, if you are trying to counter violent extremism, what are you recruiting for? Is there an alternate purpose or a compelling vision that draws youth in? VE groups already have those things. The challenge remains in being able to create that compelling pull factor(s).

### Reintegration and Rehabilitation of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs)

**Facilitator:** Behar Xharra, Consultant on Political Risk and Conflict Mitigation

*Key take-aways:* Differentiating between FTFs and ex-combatants, and understanding individual and community contexts, is important for developing approaches for reintegration and rehabilitation of FTFs. Recommendations include engaging family members in the process of reintegration and creating community mechanisms for support.

**What's New: Other New Approaches or Learning**
- DDR and rehabilitation processes are not new. Reintegration and rehabilitation are usually the most difficult among the four. Historically, there have been several successful DDR processes, but mostly in the context of local or civilian conflicts that were geographically bound. FTFs that joined ISIS came from different countries, detached from their home contexts. The reintegration process will be challenging as the context in each origin country will differ: institutional approaches and capacities; local dynamics, majority vs. minority dynamics, employment opportunities, etc.
- Reintegration and rehabilitation efforts of FTFs, especially those who left their home countries to join the conflict in Syria and Iraq, are new and a challenge for development and CVE practices. While many have already returned home to different countries to mostly face incarceration, many still remain in the conflict zone. It is still not clear whether they will return home. Are they disillusioned? Are they attempting to return home? Are they not allowed to return, or are there institutional mechanisms to ensure safe passage for return?
- The underlying factors that push FTFs to join differ by country, by region, by ethnic and tribal group, by ideology, etc. Reintegration back into communities will also differ according to the context. For example, someone from Nigeria who is partaking in a designated terrorist organization will have a different experience than someone who is from Belgium.
- Policy challenges for direct engagement with FTFs locally require clarity. In the case of Kosovo, FTFs who went to the conflict zones with families remain in the conflict theater. With the weakening of ISIS, many families and even FTFs have fallen into the hands of local authorities in Syria or Iraq, or can be found in internally displaced person/refugee camps. Those who returned so far have done so voluntarily. However, those who remain in local custody face lack of institutional clarity in terms of bilateral approaches for due processes, return, and liaison.

- Effective and practical approaches that aid reintegration include the ability of families to visit FTFs during their detention. This helps FTFs to not return to fight when released. Engaging and supporting wives and families of FTFs can result in positive outcomes for reintegration.

## What's Next: Recommended Research or Interventions to Test and Adopt

- There is a need to better understand how to properly engage wives and family members in the process of reintegration and how to create community mechanisms for support.
- There is a need for greater understanding of local contexts in terms of ex-combatants and FTFs. Scoping and capture in hotspots is required to inform the design of tools and approaches.
- Clarify institutional policy approaches towards dealing with FTFs in terms of direct engagement by CVE implementers and development organizations, especially when considering that we are bound by law not to provide material support to those that are legally defined as terrorists. This is a challenge in ensuring proper and effective programing for reintegration.
- Comparing radicalization across different groups to understand potential public outreach and advocacy approaches. Determine typology and find low-hanging fruits and advocacy platforms.
- Risk assessments and determinations for engaging, disengaging, recalibrating, and reengaging.

## Risks and Caveats: Risks and Possible Mitigating Factors

- It is difficult to make recommendations since reintegration of different individuals/groups needs to be case-by-case and based on context (Nigeria vs. Belgium vs. Syria/Iraq vs. Lebanon).
- It is difficult to assess the sincerity and efforts of the person who is disengaging.
- There are many cases of spontaneous reintegration – whereby FTFs sneak back into communities and are unknown by institutions. Such organic and individual approaches can be successful, but also a liability for potential recidivism.
- Returning FTFs can be seen as privileged (by receiving extra funding, support, job skills, etc.). This may potentially have an incentivizing effect for others who perceive that violence is rewarded.

## Youth-led Initiatives to Address VE

**Facilitator:** Robin Nelson, FHI 360 Program Manager

*Key take-aways:* Youth-led approaches to preventing violent extremism can be effective if they are based on research and mainstreamed throughout the intervention. Building an evidence base for PVE work is critical, as is broadening our understanding of positive youth development (PYD) from youth-led, to youth-empowered, programming.

## What's New: Other New Approaches or Learning

- An MSI-implemented CVE program in Lebanon is youth-focused on counter-messaging and preventing youth recruitment. The project team found that as they built trust in certain communities, they were able to talk more explicitly on VE. The government does not

recognize VE as a problem. The topic is sensitive and stigmatizing, so trust building is essential. They started by developing credibility, trust and entry points through non-CVE related activities. This enabled them to work on more explicit CVE programming with youth and led by youth. Youth talked about the psychological aspects of what they are hearing. Through these conversations, MSI was able to design more targeted, explicit CVE initiatives for youth - by youth - in these communities.

- In Afghanistan, a project brought high school and madrassa students together to work on community grievances. The project came under a CVE umbrella, but they did not talk about violence and VE. They taught the youth journalistic skills on identifying community needs and concerns, and non-violent solutions. It was successful in that they provided a platform for these groups to sit together to establish trust and relationships. The challenge was that because it was an 18-month project, it was hard to measure impact. The high school students treated the madrassa students as terrorists, and the madrassa students thought about the high school students as infidels or spies for foreign countries.

- The use of youth mapping in getting youth engaged and understanding the dynamics, resources, etc. is key in building youth civic engagement element. Under the USAID PDEV project implemented by FHI 360 young people were supported and empowered to be outreach agents, facilitators of the dialogue, and to be facilitators with other youth. The United Nations resolution on youth engagement revealed there is hesitation among some governments to promote youth civic engagement.

- A project on gangs in Latin America/Honduras highlighted work on self-identity and how that is a motivation for joining gangs, "being part of something bigger than myself." The youth create a name or identity for the group of youth they are working with and this enables them to create their own identity and provides them with an identity they can rely. The project works through local organizations who are already in the community to ensure access and trust in the community.

- There is a need for tangible outcomes from youth-led activities, and not just skills building.

- A micro scholarship (Department of State) in Iraq in 2004 started off with a CVE focus. The program taught English, introducing participants to the U.S. way of life, and built trust between the youth in Iraqi communities and U.S. communities. Increasingly, those engaged in these programs are not taking a violent path. The project was not youth-led, but focused on youth empowerment, including critical thinking exchange.

- The overall concern of PYD is that initiatives are youth-focused, and not youth-led. A lot of it is a partnership, with youth organizations and schools or municipal systems. Components of a PYD approach: a new sense of identity, defensive association, resilience skills, and using those skills to map the community and identify how you can contribute to the community, facilitate dialogue with other enablers in the community, and making sure that the contribution is there. VEOs have resources to invest in youth empowerment, and we need to invest too. Youth build resilience, but then what? We need to make that link.

**What's Next: Recommended Research or Interventions to Test and Adopt**
- Build an evidence base and look at what learning is out there to inform programs. For example, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) put out the VE in Africa report; they talked to different combatants and charted the path to VE. Most USAID programs in

CVE are asking to better understand this process; focus on the tipping point of people joining. In that research, they found that the tipping point is government actions that are perceived as unjust.

- Beware of tokenism and small insignificant efforts when it comes to PYD. PYD needs to be mainstreamed into the program. We cannot let youth engagement and empowerment and a youth-led focus just be an activity. It has to be the framework of the project and should be mainstreamed throughout. How to mainstream PYD in prevention programs and DDR programs? We need to move it beyond an add-on activity. This highlights the importance of the reframing point – thinking about why young people are joining. A lot of it is looking for opportunities, and how do you work with communities to create and capitalize on opportunities for youth?
- Consider broadening our understanding of PYD programs to consider youth-empowered initiatives, rather than just youth-led.
- Consider the impact of critical thinking in educational systems. We need to institutionalize critical thinking and engage governments in this process, and not just through programs.
- What is the political participation aspect that we should be understanding better? Civic education and understanding rights and responsibilities underpins programming. Students act as mentors to others in teaching the importance of political engagement and how to do it. Leverage the drive of youth to participate. Programming to understand formal and informal pathways for engagement in politics, and to identify entry points to get youth engaged in decision making. Youth figure out issues they are passionate about, and they know how to mobilize around them. Sometimes these are single issues they can rally behind and see change.
- You cannot just work with youth. You need to work on intergenerational relationships and institutions that facilitate the ability of youth to be engaged. There might be institutional barriers that need to be dealt with. Create an environment for power-sharing and relationship-building.
- Some programs focus on employment as an output/objective of engagement. It is important to have an end objective or output at the end of an engagement process.

**Risks and Caveats: Risks and Possible Mitigating Factors**
- One challenge of youth-led initiatives is that they can pose a risk to youth participants who then can become a target. We need to work on an enabling environment to ensure that they are successful in avoiding this danger.

**Youth Resilience**

**Facilitator:** Kirstin Brady, FHI 360 Technical Director, Youth Learning

*Key take-aways:* Definitions are again important when considering youth resilience. Resilience is not just how one copes with or responds to a threat. It can also be considered as a contribution to a pro-social outcome. Recommendations include conducting more research to better understand individual vs. community resilience, as well as developing protective factors for confronting adversity that bridge individual and community approaches.

**What's New: Other New Approaches or Learning**

- Resilience has been defined as being able to cope with a threat. The term resilient implies that there is a threat. If someone says to me, "you are going to be a resilient youth," I am not sure how I would react. We could think of it instead as a contribution or working towards a prosocial outcome.
- The biggest challenge is finding a definition of resilience that can be measured in the context of PVE.
- In the context of PVE, the key to youth resilience are the protective factors that enable youth to confront adversity. The link between individual and community is what creates protective factors. The individual and family link creates a greater sense of agency and optimism.
- We are not talking about what the psychology field offers, yet the field of positive psychology has contributed a lot towards understanding resilience.
- A lot of PYD research talks about the importance of youth having opportunities to contribute, build skills and connect, and develop positive relationships. But resilience is framed in terms of "shocks and threats" rather than resilience leading to greater contributions by youth, and youth being connected to a purpose. The definition of resilience used by USAID needs to be modified when used for PVE.
- We assume that more resilient youth are less likely to join VE groups, but could it be that they are more likely to join? Resilient youth have agency and find a way to make it for themselves.
- Youth resilience is just one piece. You must be able to redirect youth to alternative pathways. That is where individual meets with community resilience, and the need for a pathway from individual resilience to community resilience; i.e., individuals can pursue pathways to deliver something for the community (social goods).

**What's Next: Recommended Research or Interventions to Test and Adopt**
- What is unique about youth and resilience compared to just the general population?
- Youth seek approval from peers and developmental identity. Youth are not as skeptical as adults.
- Can young people grow their lives in a normal fashion, gain ground in the same way they would have in a non-resilient context?
- When we talk about building resilience, can we talk about what we are not able to do?
- When we talk about resilience programming in the U.S., there is DARE which did not work. Police came in and told kids not to do drugs. Youth question authority, so the most effective way to get youth to not smoke is by telling them that authorities (big executives at a tobacco company) want you to smoke.
- Which local partner is the right partner to deliver the message?
- What are the skills related to resilience? We have to change our view of resilience in the face of disaster. We can reframe our definition of resilience so it is about optimism.
- We need more research on cultural differences and individual differences related to resilience.
- What makes a youth resilient? Reactions to injustice are very strong in adolescence.
- We have to separate structural elements (exposure to violence) from individual risk. Individual risk will vary from one person to another.

- Protective factors are where we can intervene.
- Resilience as "what you bring to adverse situation."
- How to measure resilience?

**Risks and Caveats: Risks and Possible Mitigating Factors**
- N/A

### Social Media and Alternative Messaging

**Facilitator:** Theo Dolan, FHI 360 PVE Technical Advisor

***Key take-aways:*** In terms of developing effective alternative and/or countering messaging, we need research that provides a contextual analysis of the language we will be countering. Lessons from public health behavior change communications and marketing approaches can be integrated into PVE campaigns. The sequencing of an effective alternative messaging intervention can start with research, followed by the messaging campaign and then on-the-ground programming to reinforce the messaging.

**What's New: Other New Approaches or Learning**
- This is part of a broader conversation which could include counter messaging. A lot of resources are thrown at this area, but there are very few effective examples to learn from.
- Example of the Northeast Nigeria network approach: fellows are trained in social media outreach.
  Research leads to testing and implementation. Here we can bridge the two approaches.
- Community Champions and Mentors: you can blend the mechanisms and provide local messengers that are trusted and positively viewed by people.
- PeaceTech Lab's research in Mombasa, Kenya addresses the question: why would you attempt alternative messaging without understanding the language and the context first? In a sense that is innovative because it is often overlooked.
- Example of peer-to-peer CVE initiative: it gave money to 10,000 domestic university students to develop counter messaging. The learning is that 40 percent saw hate/violent extremism messaging online. There are some ways that youth can be involved in disrupting and challenging extremism. This effort was focused domestically, but it could be applied in other contexts.
- Example of the talent/challenge competition: 75 percent of entries were alternative messaging campaigns promoting a diverse/tolerant society. Few projects were doing targeted work, while some would go off on weird tangents to change the way that we report through the media by providing guidelines for reporters. How can they follow up on these initiatives?
- One important lesson is that lessons from health behavior change efforts can be applied to the CVE space. Fundamental in health research is that you do analysis on the ground on what is driving peoples' behaviors, and then you pilot the messaging. The research is woven into the campaign.
- How do actors manipulate historical narratives in a community? This history may not even represent actual community history. The mobile history lab in Guatemala pointed out how that country's history is being manipulated.

**What's Next: Recommended Research or Interventions to Test and Adopt**

- The gender dimension of messaging is missing, and more testing and research is needed in this area. Women are recruited in different ways than men. Women are influenced more through Koranic verse whereas men respond to different narratives. There are different patterns in accessing information for women. More research or testing around how women look at messaging is needed. How are women interpreting and bringing meaning to that messaging?

- Messaging is social behavior change communication. Marketing is linked to this, so if you can incorporate this level of professionalism into a marketing campaign, you can do so with PVE. Start with what behavior do you want to see and by whom. Then ask, what do I need to do for the message to resonate with "x" audience to discourage or recruit? Every demographic will have a unique viewpoint, so how can we apply marketing lessons to specific targeting? Frequently, it is more effective to have youth discussions around the issue than having a media campaign. It is not about the messaging, it is about the campaign you are conducting. It does not just have to be media, instead it can be a forum. Engagement by leaders on the same messaging is useful. Messages cannot stand alone, you have to follow up with programming/forums to reinforce the messaging. Partner with local organizations for youth empowerment and youth activities.

- There are efforts to look at narratives produced by terrorist organizations in Northeast Nigeria and West Africa to see how social media is being used by the group itself/affiliates/supporters, and then how people are reacting to, and talking about, this messaging. We used research designed to inform ongoing programming. The useful element is to have programming supported by research. This effort provided an online campaign, training on social media and solutions and used a network approach to build on an existing program.

- The bridge between research and implementation requires investment, which scares people, but it can tell you a lot about things beyond just the program. To explain the complexities, the hate speech research in South Sudan told the story of local dynamics and the history of the people/region.

- We have to be better at training for local research capacity. It is often safer for locals to be conducting the research, and you leave behind people with a new analytical lens in their community.

- Behavior change, and the role of the facilitator, needs to come from the community. If the facilitator or the person who could be a mentor is local, the target audience will be more open and it will be less risky. Community champions come down to whose message they will accept.

- Focus groups can be built around the VE terms and phrases that youth have identified, fostering a discussion. Then you can build the strategic communication and design solutions around that. What might resonate depends on the testing. Pair research with the discussion of the terminology. Give participants the opportunity to expose the false narratives.

**Risks and Caveats: Risks and Possible Mitigating Factors**

- One main risk is the safety and security issue (and credibility) of alternative messaging. Mitigation strategy – how do you test difficult messages which are safe for beneficiaries?

Focus groups and testing message resonance is actually feasible. It is something people must incorporate into design and understand how to not put people at risk through their answers. We need to design methodologies and evaluation that are conflict sensitive and test the credibility factor.

- The manipulation of social and cultural history is a risk. You need vetting sessions to raise awareness – the marketing approach takes into account the manipulation factor.

### Engaging Parents and Other Influencers

**Facilitator:** Tarek Maassarani, Peacebuilding Expert Consultant

*Key take-aways:* Some successful approaches in engaging parents have emerged, such as training mothers to look for risk factors in their children and assigning social workers to families to decrease risk factors in youth. However, significantly more research is needed, including analyzing the scale, cost effectiveness and impact of rehabilitation and reintegration programs, as well as exploring trauma-informed approaches for youth and their families.

### What's New: Other New Approaches and Learning

- Research with moderate degrees of success: mothers are trained to look for risk factors in their kids.
- Success has been found in assigning family counselor/social workers to decrease risk factors in youth that have been deemed at-risk of radicalization, with secondary work in gangs.
- The importance of peer groups in the radicalization process is key, but we have not seen research that has tried to target the peer ecosystem yet.
- Far right groups in Europe and the U.S.: sometimes parents are not radicalized, but they are influencers or enabling the youth's radical beliefs. So you need another person as an influencer to bring them around.
- There is anecdotal success around engagement of former fighters with those who are radicalized and thinking through off-ramps.
- Research in Southeast Asia, Pakistan and North Africa show the failure of moderate religious leaders, but highly conservative religious leaders were able to influence de-radicalization. Global Communities has engaged with moderate religious leaders in public forums, and the youth asked questions and learned that they were not actually aware of what was in the Koran. When they learned about the details from the moderate religious leaders, it did not help those who are becoming radicalized. Conservative religious leaders can help those who are already radicalized.
- How to keep youth out of prisons? Because once they are in there, they are out of reach of interventions.
- We can focus on enhancing community-based policing, positive engagement, relationship building with police and the youth and their families, since it is usually not a good relationship.  (Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria). These activities can professionalize policing at the community level, and also have second order, pro-social affects.

- Exit programs: Open the door to former extremists to let them leave groups and return home by understanding the social stresses that people will encounter going through the process of change as they return.
- What kind of pressures are their family members dealing with to provide support for people who want to come back? Question around whether families want them to come back, because in Kenya they had to work with people to make sure their family welcomes them back after they have been radicalized and have done terrible things.
- Restorative justice training provides a model of a holistic approach to consider.
- Scaling up the capacity of social workers at municipal level to be able to deal with CVE and anti-social behavior is important.
- Using a data driven model is key.

**What's Next: Recommended Research or Interventions to Test and Adopt**
- Rehabilitation and reintegration: you could put dollar values on the type of intervention. Assess religious leaders vs. parents vs. former fighters vs. community policing, and you could find the most cost-effective model, and then you could present that to the policymakers.
- Impact evaluations on these interventions: Models that are 3 to 4 years old that seem to be functioning need to be researched and have an impact evaluation to see if they are really working.
- Most things are well-established processes, but they are not really being shared so they can be scaled. There needs be more exchange of ideas and successes, perhaps through a hub.
- There are vague successes but nothing in a form that can be operational to those who need it.
- On the role of violence in general, how does being around violence put youth at risk of VE? What is the next step? We need a public health informed approach, a trauma informed approach for people, but there also needs to be funding for people to be educated in this approach. Internationally, there is experience of trauma directed against the individual or family at the hands of the state.
- Restorative justice: piloting restorative justice approaches with reintegration efforts is important.
- Need a code of ethics to see what is allowed and not allowed in terms of P/CVE research – including human subjects research and randomized control trials.

**Risks and Caveats: Risks and Possible Mitigating Factors**
- Social stigma feelings: "not in my backyard"
- Do no harm standards, particularly for community entry.
- Risk of political interference: effects of local groups wanting to work with USAID and other U.S. programs.
- Language we use – terms like CVE do not go over well, sometimes beneficiaries find it offensive. Public health language is better; trauma informed or violence prevention.

- Ethics around how to advance and research P/CVE and setting up randomized control trials that leave people in a risky situation. There is an obligation to support those who are at risk.