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Community Action Strategy

Countering Violent Extremism In Kenya

RELIGIOUS ACTORS

The Community Action Strategy (CAS) is the product of an extensive USAID-funded study into violent extremist (VE) and counter violent extremism (CVE) social and communications networks in several Kenyan counties (Kwale, Mombasa, Nairobi and Nyeri). It provides suggestions and best practices for communicating with various stakeholders and in various locations. The CAS recommendations are not specific to counter-messaging interventions and do not only address work with ‘at risk’ youth. Rather, the CAS offers advice on how to communicate with entire communities, including local support networks that shape the broad social and cultural norms that inform how all actors, including youth, perceive and respond to VE. This document, the second in a series of six, provides recommendations for working with religious actors.

Preliminary Considerations and Approaches

- Conduct a detailed stakeholder analysis within the community before you begin. Perceptions of the same religious actors and faith-based organizations and institutions vary from neighborhood to neighborhood based on their credibility, social capital, networks, experience, and capacity in each locale.
 - Remember religious stakeholders operate in a wider social ecosystem – do not assume they are all popular or considered legitimate by all community members. Societal, generational, political, and ideological tensions could diminish their reach and impact in specific contexts or across certain subgroups – ensuring appropriate representation will require continual engagement.
 - For example, contention around mosque management and the composition of local mosque committees could generate grievances that undermine the credibility of older clerics, particularly if youths feel marginalized or frustrated.
 - Map the mediums and sites used by religious stakeholders to diagnose gaps in coverage e.g., social media and online platforms, radio broadcasts, peer-to-peer networking, and establish whether outreach is conducted formally (e.g., via Friday sermons at the mosque) or informally to engage those outside the ‘usual congregation’.
- Conduct a detailed contextual analysis to identify constraints and operable parameters for engaging religious stakeholders in CVE programming.
 - This will frame the language and scope of public outreach. For instance, explicitly referencing al Shabaab or countering the group’s narratives may require sensitivity and tact in Nairobi and Mombasa but be impossible in Kwale due to local fears.
 - Similarly, language used depends on the audience: directly citing al Shabaab could be detrimental when speaking to individuals considered ‘at risk’ as it could push them away. However, in some settings it is important not to shy away from discussing the group, as communities need to understand the threat.

- Understand the risks of overt cooperation. There are already (erroneous) perceptions of VE as a 'Muslim problem': working exclusively (or in some cases openly) with Islamic authorities, institutions and organizations may exacerbate notions of 'suspect communities' and prove counterproductive.
 - In certain cases, affiliation with CVE stakeholders, messages, or programs could undermine the credibility of religious actors. Understanding the local context is paramount for identifying those to openly engage, those to tacitly engage, and those requiring greater independence.

Practicalities and Programming

- Consider partnerships with faith-based organizations and religious actors as collaboration can help leverage comparative advantages between different stakeholders.
 - Faith-based organizations, clerics, and madrasa teachers are fluent in religious matters, but some may struggle to discuss current affairs, socioeconomic problems, or other local grievances. Conversely, CSOs do not necessarily have the authority to participate in theological debates but can speak to broader societal and structural issues. These different inputs could be complementary, reflecting the dynamism and diverse voices needed to tackle VE.
 - Cooperation can increase access and reach. Information systems are often defined by religion, especially in cities, with members subscribing to faith-based identities and developing social groups on the back of sectarian networks, meaning theological actors can function as important interlocutors and messengers.
 - However, these authority figures and FBOs are not a panacea: do not assume VE is necessarily a theological or ideological issue, or that it is exclusively driven by terrorist propaganda: radicalization and/or recruitment can be the product of many factors, including socioeconomic opportunism, structural grievances, pragmatism, and/or coercion.
- Engage with mosques and faith-based organizations to tackle wider social and economic grievances.
 - Remember that the influence and agency of religious stakeholders are not necessarily confined to theology – spiritual institutions supply welfare services, financial aid, and food to surrounding neighborhoods, meaning they can work on a practical level to alleviate (some) socioeconomic insecurities.
 - As they are often enmeshed in commercial networks and local markets, they may also be in a position to help facilitate linkages between CVE programs, businesses, and the private sector.
- Build the capacity of clerics and religious authorities, where necessary and appropriate, to contextualize scripture, and engage proactively with local audiences, improving their capacity to broadcast messages and information.
 - Informal outreach creates more opportunities for dynamic engagement in comparison to conventional didactic approaches, such as structured lectures. Informal, participatory sessions can foster a sense of empowerment and may help steer the conversation towards specific areas of interest, interpretation, and concern for the audience, strengthening their relevance and resonance.
 - Encourage one-on-one interaction on and offline, since it may not be possible to speak to the problems, sensitivities, or confusion of specific individuals in a group-setting.
 - When working with religious leaders, consider using a Qur'anic expert who can authoritatively use Arabic as this can increase trust in the interlocutor.

- Support religious stakeholders in facilitating and managing **inter-faith dialogues** and social activities as they can strengthen communal bonds, societal cohesion and improve both individual and collective resilience.
 - ➔ Do not assume VE is always generated by inter-faith tensions. Research suggests that societal fragmentation and hostility between Islam and Christianity is now comparatively latent, with community grievances focused much more on exclusionary state institutions.
 - ➔ Support religious stakeholders in facilitating and mediating **intra-faith dialogues** and social activities as many of the grievances exploited by VE recruiters derive from friction within faith communities. Address these rifts through proactive discussion and sensitization in order to strengthen relations between theological leaders and community members and provide a foundation for resolving divisions in a sustainable way.
- Support and, where appropriate, strengthen the capacity of informal or ad hoc early warning systems.
 - ➔ In precarious or insecure contexts, religious stakeholders may form informal or improvised networks to regulate the content of sermons and madrasa curricula, even if they are not overtly sharing CVE messages or participating in local programs. These offer an important opportunity to flag suspicions that CSOs can then investigate/corroborate further.
- Convene religious and community stakeholders together to review and discuss the school curricula, and identify avenues for civic education, including through madrasas. Support the establishment of 'integrated' education systems that combine both secular and religious pedagogy.





For a detailed copy of the findings of the USAID-funded study, please contact:

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