Communities' Perceptions of Reintegration of Al-Shabaab Returnees in Mombasa and Kwale Counties, Kenya

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Abstract

This study explores community perceptions of reintegration of returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) from Al-Shabaab in coastal Kenya. Drawing from fieldwork accounts collected in Kwale and Mombasa Counties, Kenya, this study nuances and problematizes communities' perception of reintegration. The study fits into a growing yet unsettled discourse of what works well in reintegration initiatives for returning foreign terrorist fighters. Governments worldwide are focusing on fighting Islamist terror groups like ISIS and Al-Shabaab in East Africa. But the need to also build other strategic counter-terrorism capabilities has developed, even more so in the rehabilitation and reintegration of returning foreign terrorist fighters. How host communities perceive this shift from a whole-of-government, hard approach, to a whole-of-community, soft approach, will determine how effective this strategy is in the global fight against terrorism. In Kenya, it is estimated that at least 1,000 returnees live in communities along the coastal areas of Kwale and Mombasa. There is a paucity of research focusing on the perceptions of those communities absorbing the returnees in Kenya. This study draws on 31 interviews with government officials, returnees, academic experts, civil society actors, and 104 questionnaire interviews with community members in Kwale and Mombasa. The study's findings show that while the family and the society at large may be longing to see their loved ones, there are competing dilemmas involved, including stigma and negative labelling. The study also found that there is a lack of structures to ensure proper involvement of host communities in the reintegration of returnees. As such, the process is marred by lack of trust and negative labelling, which affects positive reintegration. The study's findings are useful for counter-radicalization policy formulation and practical peacebuilding interventions at the community level.

Keywords: Reintegration, Terrorism, Al-Shabaab, Rehabilitation, Kwale County

Introduction

This study's central focus is to examine the perceptions of two communities in coastal Kenya concerning the reintegration of returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs). The study identifies the need for more concerted government–community relations to overcome some imminent

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reintegration barriers. It observes broadly that negative perceptions exist around returnees. The dilemmas explored here, while valid, speak to the need for a whole-of-community approach to address this growing phenomenon. The scope of the present research was coastal Kenya (Mombasa and Kwale Counties). These two regions have been named as hotspots of violent extremism and radicalization in Kenya. Media reports and academic research point out these two Counties as the regions where most fighters return as well. There are considerable estimates of at least 1,000 returnees in the coastal region of Kenya (Mkutu & Opondo, 2019). Both Mombasa and Kwale Counties have a couple of reintegration initiatives set up by local governments and local non-governmental organizations.

This study uses the term foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) to denote those individuals who travel abroad, to join terror groups, and then return to their countries of origin. When speaking of returnees, the present study only refers to former FTFs. Globally, terrorism returnees have now become a major source of concern, more so with the possibility that upon their return, these trained individuals can perpetuate attacks or other forms of harm in their home countries (Styszynski, 2015; Koehler 2015). A 2016 report by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism puts the number of foreign fighters from the European Union at between 3,922 and 4,294, a majority of whom come from Belgium, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Of these, 30 % returned home (Boutin, Chauzal, Dorsey, Jegerings, Paulussen, Pohl, Reed & Zavagli, 2016). With thousands of FTFs travelling back home, countries must develop successful reintegration programmes as a way of preventing recidivism among returnees and also to mitigate the risk of further radicalization. Such programmes can also help to build overall community-level resilience to violent extremism (Holmer & Shtuni, 2017).

Similar to many other countries, Kenya is facing the challenge of managing the return of its citizens who fought with Al-Shabaab or who joined the group to act in different capacities. Cragin (2019) notes that Kenya is a significant contributor to foreign fighters, not just to Al-Shabaab but also to the Islamic State, with about 100 fighters from Kenya having travelled to fight in Iraq and Syria. Eight out of these are in prison while the whereabouts of at

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least 70 of them remains unknown (Cragin, 2019). Thousands of others have joined Al-Shabaab in Somalia and at some point, made their way back home. As Horgan and Braddock (2010) note, many open questions exist, for example, the returnees' place in society, their prospects of reintegration, as well as acceptance from the host communities: "Where will they go? Who will monitor them? Will they re-offend? Can they be turned away from terrorism while in prison? Will any recidivism rate prove acceptable to the public? (p. 268)."

In Kenya, efforts have been made to facilitate rehabilitation and reintegration. This study investigates how communities in the coastal region of Mombasa and Kwale perceive the reintegration of these returnees. Many other states like Somalia, Afghanistan, Belgium and the Netherlands already run various reintegration programmes with different outcomes. Most studies focusing on these programmes are usually descriptive accounts of the programmes or theoretical (Koehler, 2016). Grossman and Barolsky (2019) observe that significant gaps in knowledge about the role of communities in countering violent extremism (CVE) exist, even more so regarding the role of communities and ways to empower them in CVE efforts. More attention has been directed towards literature that largely focuses on the role of the community in preventing violent extremism. Equally, paying less attention on engagement with those who have "previously been radicalized to violence or otherwise exposed to violent radicalized beliefs, influences and settings" (p. 21). Hence, there is a gap in literature on the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnee terrorists, especially on the premise of the role of communities and their experiences. The following study aims to address that gap in the literature.

Countering violent extremism (CVE) has become a 'catchphrase' applied in the context of preventing terrorist threats. Even though there is yet to be consensus on what the term entails, a more practical view refers to it as a set of non-coercive measures to prevent terrorism (Ambrozik, 2019; Williams, 2017). CVE involves, among other activities, counter-radicalization methods. CVE is a field of policy practice as opposed to an academic study. The CVE field emerged in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks in the United States. Whereas in post-9/11 there was a focus on the use of coercive and hard power

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approaches to respond to the threat by terrorism, an emerging CVE discourse altered these approaches. CVE remains critical of the use of force in dealing with terrorism. It calls for the use of softer and non-coercive responses to prevent the rise of terrorism in the first place (Harris-Hogan et al., 2016). CVE is, thus; a departure from counter-terrorism approaches that engage in military means to deal with an ever-changing security landscape (Mogire & Mkutu, 2011).

The United Nations (2014) defines reintegration as "the process by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status and gain sustainable employment and income. Reintegration is essentially a social and economic process with an open time frame, primarily taking place in communities at the local level. It is part of the general development of a country and national responsibility and often necessitates long-term external assistance" (p.25). There are varying definitions of what the term radicalization actually includes. Bennett (2019) defines it as "a process through which an individual comes to accept a worldview that is contrary to mainstream thought and may support the use of violence to realize his or her ideas" (p. 48). The concept of violent extremism is applied in this study to mean "advocating, engaging or supporting ideologically motivated violence to further socio, economic or political goals" (Romaniuk et al., 2018: 162). Reintegration, therefore, denotes the "assimilation of former combatants into communities" (Alexander, 2012:48). This involves the "establishment of social, familial, and communities' ties and positive participation in society" (Holmer & Shtuni, 2017:402). The establishment of reintegration programmes is critical to prevent recidivism of returnees, but also for reducing the threats of youth radicalization, besides building community resilience against violent extremism (Holmer & Shtuni, 2017).

Methodology

A case study approach was employed to analyze how communities perceive returnees' reintegration in Mombasa and Kwale Counties. Tight (2017) defines a case study as the study

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of a complex and bounded case(s), in its context, with the analysis undertaken seeking to be holistic. The case study method is a recognized tool for researchers to gather qualitative information (Breslin & Buchanaan, 2008). This includes information that is highly descriptive because it is grounded in deep and varied sources (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). Mombasa and Kwale Counties were chosen for being among the hotspot Counties for radicalization and violent extremism in Kenya. Together with Lamu County, they were the first Counties to launch "County Action Plans on Violent Extremism" (Mombasa County, 2018).

Participants

A mixed methods exploration was undertaken in the two areas of Mombasa and Kwale, Kenya, between June and August 2020. Thirty-one in-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted, two of which with returnees and the rest with key informants, stakeholders, and actors involved in reintegration initiatives. The sample included civil society actors (CS), professors as part of the academic community (P), journalists (J), police officers (PO), key informants (KI), government officials (GO), religious leaders (RL) and village elders (VA). Data from the community was collected using an online questionnaire. A total of 104 responses were received from both Kwale and Mombasa Counties.

An interview guide was prepared for all interviews which, except for two, were conducted in English. Those two interviews were done in *Swahili* and translated into English. The data collected from the interviews was first processed by transcribing the interviews. Qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis was used to analyse the data and organize it into categories and themes based on the questions the study sought to answer. Data from questionnaires submitted through Survey Monkey was analyzed and presented as tables, graphs, and percentages.

Ethical Considerations

The research team outlined and explained the study objectives to the participants. To ensure anonymity, all interviewees are only referred to by professional category and numerical identifiers. The purpose of the study was reiterated to all interviewees throughout the study, to ensure an informed decision about their study participation. Each participant gave consent to take part. To further ensure safety and confidentiality in this research, no names were listed in the research notes or reports and there was no videotaping of any interview. Hard and soft copies of interview notes and questionnaires were securely kept and only available to those directly involved in the research. Engagement with national and local government, law enforcement, and civil society organizations was sought throughout the research to ensure minimization of risks for the interviewees. Research permission was secured from the National Commission for Science, Technology & Innovation (NACOSTI) and was accorded under permit number 329110. Similarly, a review by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at United States International University in Nairobi was sought, and permission was granted to proceed with the research.

Literature Review

In response to evolving terrorist tactics, recognition is growing that hard, security-based approaches alone will not effectively address terrorism challenges. Scholars such as Gunaratna (2013) and Holmer and Shtuni (2017) note that fighting terrorism using kinetic and lethal methods, based on interventions by intelligence services, use of military force and law enforcement, has proved to be an inefficient approach, since it cannot stem the spread of ideological extremism, which is the foundation of terrorism. Community-based policy programmes for countering violent extremism (CVE programmes) have now become a core component of national counter-terrorism strategies aiming to counter the spread of extremist ideology and religious radicalization (Hardy, 2017). These programmes include a variety of

specific initiatives, ranging from education projects and community policing strategies to targeted interventions for individuals at risk of radicalization, and building overall community-level resilience to violent extremism.

Most of the literature on reintegration in Africa focuses on ex-offender rehabilitation and reintegration after release from prison. Even in these settings, it is widely acknowledged by scholars in CVE that ex-offenders struggle to adjust when they return to their former communities. Other factors that complicate their reintegration include broken family and community relationships, unemployment, and lack of after-care services, among others (Chikadzi, 2017). Some African countries, for instance, Somalia have developed programmes to handle disengaged combatants. Gelot and Hansen (2019) discuss the "National Programme for the Treatment and Handling of Disengaged Combatants and Youth at Risk in Somalia" which was launched in 2012 to "provide support to low-risk disengaged Al-Shabaab combatants [and] to reintegrate them back into the community" (p. 569). Additionally, in partnership with actors such as the UN Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) and support from governments such as Denmark and Norway set up at least four facilities. Khalil, Brown, Chant, Olowo, and Wood (2019) analyze the experiences of former combatants in one of the rehabilitation centres in Somalia (Serendi Rehabilitation Centre). Similarly, they emphasize the importance of establishing and maintaining familial and communal ties from the beginning of the rehabilitation process. Regarding community perceptions of reintegration, their report observes that these can be highly diverse, ranging from acceptance to extreme ostracization, depending on whether a community, clan or family's experience with Al-Shabaab has been negative or positive.

UNSOM itself published a report in 2016 entitled "Voices of Al-Shabaab: Understanding former combatants from the Baidoa Reintegration Center". The mission looks at key pillars for a comprehensive approach to counter Al-Shabaab and recommends the inclusion of family members and clan leaders of those affected in the communication strategy for the reintegration narrative. Ehiane (2019) weighs in with a look at the Nigerian experience with Boko Haram. Drawing from the country's National Counter-Terrorism Strategy

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(NACTEST), a policy framework that aims to de-radicalize extremist groups, rehabilitate, reintegrate, and finally disengage the groups from violence, Ehiane contends that there is too much emphasis on military actions, as well as ending support to militant ideologies. More importantly, there is least focus on the social context the former combatants might reintegrate into as well as the communities' perceptions.

While some literature on the role of communities in reintegration processes in Africa exists, most of it approaches this subject from the point of view of the returnees/ex-combatants and their experiences trying to reintegrate. Less exploration is done regarding the communities' perspectives hosting these returnees, their involvement in, and perceptions of, the reintegration programmes. This is surprising since the positive support and active participation of communities logically are key to the success of reintegration and rehabilitation.

A Brief History: Returnees' Spread in Kenya's Kwale and Mombasa Counties

Kwale and Mombasa Counties have been hotspots for terrorism and radicalization. Mkutu and Opondo (2019) observe that in these two counties, branches of groups exist that believe in the necessity of establishing a caliphate, for example *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, as well as several mosques influenced by radical teachings. Further, extremist groups use cover agencies that send young people to countries, for instance, Yemen and Syria under the disguise of providing employment. Since Kenya announced an amnesty programme for Al-Shabaab returnees from Somalia in 2015, many young men admitted to having been members of the group and surrendered to the authorities (Ombati, 2020). Cragin (2019) estimates that there are at least 20 former ISIS fighters who have returned to Kenya and have not been incarcerated. Mkutu and Opondo (2019) note that for Kwale alone, "the estimates of returnee FTFs vary from 300 to 1000" (p.13). In their socio-economic and demographic survey of Kenyan returnees conducted in 2015, the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims (SUPKEM) and the International

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Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated a total population of about 700 returnees spread in the coastal counties of Kilifi, Kwale, and Mombasa (IOM, 2015).

How Al-Shabaab Returnees in Kenya's Mombasa and Kwale are Reintegrated

Kenya's reintegration experience is novel. It began specifically in 2015 with the announcement of an amnesty programme. In 2016, President Uhuru Kenyatta launched the National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism (NSCVE) which included prevention and counter-radicalization to the more traditional counter-terrorism approaches already in place. This strategy assigns roles to various government agencies, county governments, civil society organizations and communities. Before the NSCVE strategy, measures against violent extremism were security-focused and anchored on the Prevention of Terrorism Act, 2012; the Security Laws (Amendment), Act, 2014; the Proceeds of Crime and Anti-Money Laundering (Amendment) Act, 2017 (Ogada, 2017; Mogire & Mkutu, 2011). These laws address violent extremism by policing, intelligence gathering, and prosecution. The Strategy came in to complement them and look at the softer approaches and means of reducing communities' vulnerability to violent extremism. The Kenyan government, like others globally, realizes that hard power alone cannot address this threat.

New interventions are continuously focusing on community engagement to build improved relations with citizens, which aids in the gathering of terror-related information by the police, identification of violent extremists and curtailing radicalization (Cherney & Hartley, 2017). Kenya's comprehensive strategy derives from the country's strong perception of terrorism threats. Securitising terrorism is an existential threat that requires extraordinary interventions to address it. Interestingly, this is a war of allies and foes, with those fighting against it perceived as allies and those against as foes. This came out strongly in President Uhuru Kenyatta's speech, as he launched the 2016 NSCVE, where he encouraged a united approach to counter terrorism using the 'us' versus 'them' framing. "The world's security

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agencies, multilateral institutions, and the overwhelming bulk of civil society stand against them. In every continent, armies and police forces are fighting them (p.1)".

The Kenya Government mandated Counties to develop County Action Plans (CAPs) to support the national CVE efforts at the local level. Kwale County was the first to develop a CVE plan. The Director of Kenya's National Counter Terrorism Centre and Special Envoy on CVE, Ambassador Martin Kimani, launched the Kwale County Plan for Countering Violent Extremism in February 2017, a document that discusses countering violent extremism through prevention and restorative efforts (Shauri, 2017). Mombasa County governor Hassan Joho launched Mombasa's Action Plan shortly after the Kwale one. The Action Plan is based on the nine pillars of the NSCVE, which are training and capacity building, education, psychosocial, security, media and online, arts and culture, faith-based and ideological, legal and policy and political, with an additional two pillars on women and the economy (Mombasa County, 2017). Both plans recognize the crucial role that a successful reintegration programme can play in the countering violent extremism arena.

GO1, a senior government official looks at rehabilitation and reintegration as "curative efforts" of dealing with returnees:

> "At the rehabilitation stage, a returnee is not fit to join the society, and the aim is to give counselling and psychosocial skills and impart critical reasoning skills too. It is a stage whose aim is to cure. Reintegration only happens at the point where you are sure this person (the returnee) is not a threat to the social being of the community you are releasing him into. And here the workload is both on the individual and the society, and monitoring has to continue to evaluate progress" (GO1).

GO1 further notes that 'disengagement', which Horgan (2009) loosely describes as 'leaving' a terror group precedes reintegration. Bell (2015) views disengagement as a process that focuses on purely behavioural changes, such as ceasing violent behaviour and supporting terrorism materially. Rather than resulting in a psychological shift and abandoning extremist beliefs, disengagement results in choosing nonviolent means of expressing their views. It

differs from deradicalization, which is change or reduction in ideological support or extremist beliefs (Horgan, 2009; Reinares, 2011).

Both the Kwale and the Mombasa Counties action plans include aspects of local reintegration initiatives for returning FTFs. Under the psychosocial pillar, the Mombasa County plan notes that there are limited systematic communal psychosocial support measures of dealing with returnees. The Mombasa County plan emphasizes stigma reduction for terrorism victims. The Kwale County plan is broken into several stages of intervention that include the disengagement, reintegration, and rehabilitation stages of handling returnees. Emphasis is placed on interventions that are geared towards helping individuals rethink their ideas and renounce support for violence, provision of cult-departing counselling and therapy, and establishing a sense of normalcy within the community and harmony with social norms.

In Mombasa and Kwale Counties, it is vastly acknowledged that radicalization is a growing security threat. A cross-section of residents are aware of who is a returning foreign fighter from Al-Shabaab, some of them being defectors. One question in the online survey sought the respondents' knowledge of people who had joined the Al-Shabaab in Somalia. As illustrated in Figure 1 below, 3 out of every 10 respondents (28.16 %) showed that they knew someone from their locale who had joined the Al-Shabaab in Somalia then returned home.
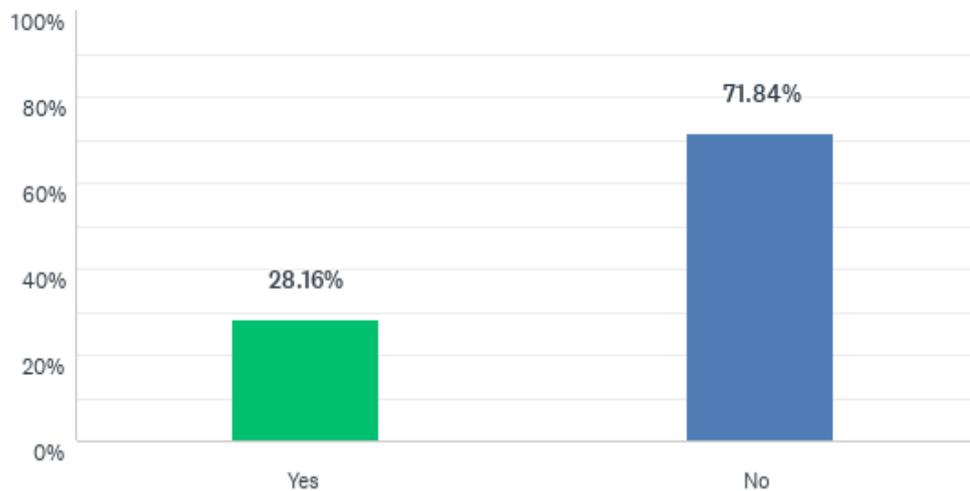
Figure 1. Knowledge of anyone who went to Somalia to join the Al-Shabaab then returned.

According to most of the key respondents interviewed, it is not a surprise that the community is aware of who the returnees are, even when the security and government agents have no records of these people. A senior police officer in Kwale noted that the community in most cases will not report returnees, so that "it protects their own". The officer attributed this 'protection' to the mistrust between the police and communities.

"Those who come back are in the community [returnees]. We know they are there, but we do not know who they are. Because the general feeling in the communities is [that] as long as the returnee is minding his own business, then there is no problem. If he conducts an attack, as long as it is not being done in their area, then they have no problem and will thus not say a word. People who were born and raised there will rarely tell you anything. Any little information we get is mostly from those who have come from elsewhere in the country and now live here" (PO3).

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The lack of trust between the state and the community has resulted from the previous repressive policing tactics such as arbitrary arrests and use of excessive force, among other negative practices. Scholars like Omeje and Githigaro (2012) note that this has been conceptualized as having an earlier focus historically on regime policing as opposed to citizen policing. In counter-terrorism policing, similar repressive tactics have further undermined the police–community relations because of the flouting of domestic law (Prestholdt, 2011). Majority of the Kenya population are of the view that the Kenya's Anti-Terrorism Police Unit (ATPU) commit varied human rights violations in the pretext of counter-terrorism (Githigaro, 2020).
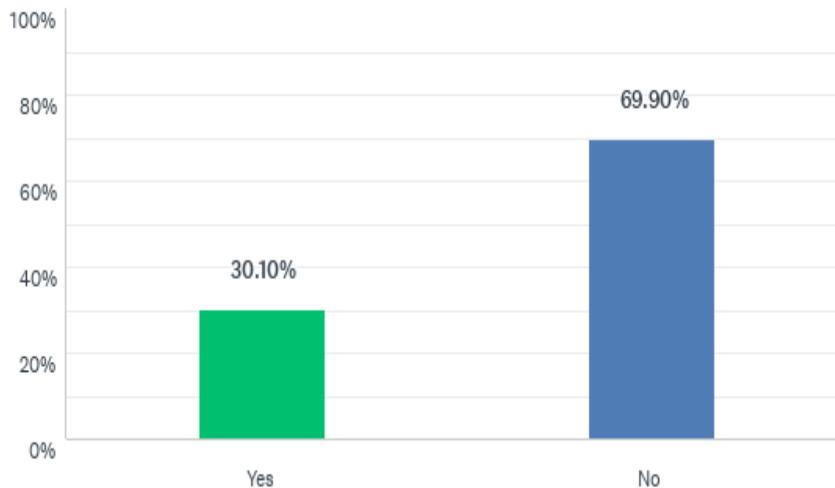
Community Perceptions of Returnees' Reintegration

The main objective of this study is to examine community perceptions of returnees' reintegration. One question in the online questionnaire sought respondents' views on reintegration of the FTFs returnees into communities. As shown in figure 2 below, a majority of the respondents who filled the online questionnaire (76.24 %) agreed to the returnees' reintegration into society. This shows that the community supports integration, even though most of them commented as being unaware of any returnees' reintegration programmes.

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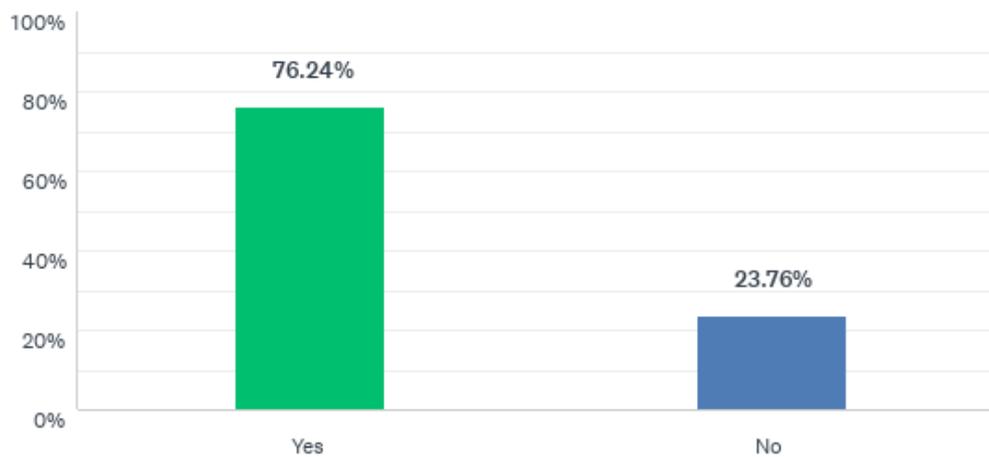
Figure 2: Should those who return from Somalia be reintegrated into society?

While the community supports returnees' reintegration, most respondents (69.90 %) admitted gaps in programmes that could support them to take part in their reintegration. This is critical since, as discussed above, community involvement and participation are key in the reintegration process. When they come back, returnees have to exist within a community, whether it is their original home or a new one, and acceptance by the community, as some key informants observed, is key for their reintegration. Figure 3 below shows that 7 out of 10 participants were not aware of any programmes they could depend on to help them understand and take part in reintegration processes.

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Figure 3: Are there any programmes put in place to help you learn how to help returnees to reintegrate into the community?

This again points to the lack of community participation, which, as discussed, is key in reintegration. Scholars agree that community engagement is beneficial to both the community and the lawmakers and enforcers who can leverage this to target their outreach efforts on key community organizations. It can also help break down stereotypes and prejudices that the police and minority groups have towards each other, eventually building the much-needed trust between stakeholders (Cherney & Hartley, 2017).

Perceptions of Secrecy and Government Mistrust

On a broader scale, the Kenya government maintains strict control over processes related to the reintegration of Al-Shabaab returnees. There is secrecy and mistrust around how returnees are handled by the government and helped to ease back into the societies. As shown in the figures above, communities in both Kwale and Mombasa Counties have a very limited

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understanding, if at all, of the reintegration processes and programmes. The communities, especially in Kwale County, rarely give information to government agencies about returnees who quietly ease back into the community. PO2, a police officer in Mombasa acknowledges that the community does not trust the system because often, the burden of proof is placed on community members who volunteer information. Civil society actors overwhelmingly voiced their concern on individuals that volunteer information to government agents being treated as suspects and being put under surveillance (CS2, CS3). "Communities know that not all government agents are loyal. Some are in the terror networks and give out information to the militants and militant groups" (CS1). PO3, a senior police officer in the coastal region agrees with these sentiments:

> "In every market, there is a mad man and there are those few cops [police officers] that do not respect confidentiality. We have them here and we need to work on them. Someone comes to report that the son of so and so has come back after disappearing for a year, or several months, and just before the one who has volunteered the information gets to his house, people are waiting for him, and calling him a traitor" (PO3).

The government is also accused by communities of using communal punishment where security officers target and harass entire villages when word goes about in the community that a returnee is among them. "They come and are sometimes very violent, breaking down doors and beating up women and children. A few weeks ago, they killed a returnee and his two children, and also his pregnant wife," VA2, a village elder from Kwale claimed. The researchers could not independently ascertain this claim. But PO1 and PO2 share that, the communities in numerous times become extremely difficult to work with. They narrate just how difficult it is to get information from the community, especially in Kwale County, which PO3 describes as a "much-closed society" and view the police as villains. The terror networks eliminate anyone seen to be collaborating with the police on CVE matters or those that the community perceive as traitors. PO3 says:

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"I have often gone to a scene of crime, where the people openly saw the perpetrator and may have seen details like the number plate of the motorcycle the perpetrator was using, say, when he gunned down someone. But everyone will tell you they saw nothing and adamantly refuse to give any information" (PO3).

These narratives explain the distance between the police and the policed. With low trust levels, debates on security assurance, witness protection, and confidentiality are prominent. CS2 notes that with the amnesty programme, many returnees came back into the society, but in what he terms a "very non-procedural and haphazard manner."

"You need to involve all the people in the reintegration process. These include the people in the village where these men and women are returning to. Here, we just wake up one day and we see the government agencies have allowed so and so to come back home. And the people are asking themselves, 'how do we relate to them? How do we handle them? What do we do when we spot fishy behaviour? Should we talk to them or associate us with their activities…?' It becomes very difficult for the entire village" (CS2).

Civil society organizations (CSOs) and community-based actors (CBAs) interviewed for this study also note that there is a lot of mistrust between them and the government, yet they are the people closest to the communities. They, for example, cannot provide detailed information on how returnee rehabilitation and reintegration happen since they may not interact directly with or reach out to returnees, and only government agencies and officials can do that. Civil society organizations which had programmes to help the returnees were at some point labelled as terrorist sympathizers by the government.

"The National Counter-Terrorism Centre treats the rehabilitation processes as top secret and would never share the nitty-gritty of those processes. I know so many people who are in hiding and will not come out because they are asking, 'if I am to surrender, what are the exact steps that would happen to me?" (CS2).

Despite being heavily involved in the development of county action plans on countering violent extremism, CSOs like Haki Africa have stopped handling returnees because of suspicion by the government (Lwanga & Atieno, 2018).

Reintegration as Something 'Imposed' on the Communities

Local interviewees perceive that reintegration in Mombasa and Kwale feels like "a government-built and pushed programme that cares less about the thoughts and needs of the local communities" (CS1). All the civil society actors interviewed observe that communities are not prepared, educated and involved in the processes of reintegration from the onset and that the approaches are top-down, without involving the host communities.

> "The government comes up with regulations and outlines of things to do, then hands that over to people from outside the region to come and implement here. What we do then is we are working blindly and not focusing on ensuring constructive engagement with the community. Security agents are looking at reintegration as purely a security issue and thus push other actors away, including the same communities that provide a home to the returnees" (CS3).

KI3, a PhD student, notes that it rarely works that way and the "importation of bureaucrats to lead the implementation of projects is the reason many government projects, not only on reintegration, fail." KI1, a seasoned researcher, supports the communities' views on the feelings of exclusion. Equally, there is the tendency of government to use community members merely as tools for collecting intelligence. The Muslim communities in Mombasa and Kwale Counties suffer most from the police surveillance, informal questioning and the suspicion of intelligence gathering by the government. Muslims, especially, also experience publicized raids and arrests that lead to anxiety, withdrawal, and the unwillingness of the affected communities to partner with government agencies in counter-terrorism initiatives.

"The government must realise the importance of using local leaders and the chaplaincy at the grassroots level. To deal with terrorism, you must realize the very strong social context, and must thus have an interface between government and community. And that interface is through these local elders at the grassroots level. You cannot bomb down an ideology; you need conversations with those affected" (KI1).

Issa and Machikou (2019) explain the importance of cooperation between county and national governments, local organizations and the traditional authorities, including the village elders, and community elders. The duo points out the importance of having local mechanisms to organize reintegration and reconciliation efforts, since various aspects of community life rely on the blessing of the traditional elders' authority. CS6 testifies:

"The engagement we see between the government and the rest of us, — the community-based organizations and other groups at the grassroots — is very superficial, with no genuine opportunity for engagement. There is no consultation, really, and people at the lower level cannot influence an outcome" (CS6).

When the grassroots authorities and the national agencies speak the same language, communities are most able to reintegrate returnees in a standardized manner (Issa & Machikou, 2019).

Returnees as 'Potential Security Threats'

While most community members interviewed as part of this study agreed that reintegration was necessary for returnees, findings also pointed out that stigma existed towards the returnees and their families. According to J1, J4 and J5, all who interviewed at least four Al-Shabaab returnees each, the hardest part for returnees when they come back is dealing with stigma and community acceptance. In addition, their families reject them. J1, J5 and J6, all seasoned journalists, on issues of terrorism and security note that all returnees they have interacted with mentioned an assurance of acceptance by their communities as a key need.

"These people are in most cases viewed as outcasts, especially, when they go back to a community where someone suffered directly as a result of a terror activity, for example, losing a loved one in a terror attack, or even property. The community shuns them as killers, even if they did not carry out an attack" (J6).

There is the fear that some returnees may not have fully reformed and are out to harm. Another fear is that they may expose communities to extra surveillance since government agents may monitor them. The stigma extends to their immediate families, and it becomes very hard for them to coexist with other members of society. JI who has interviewed dozens of returnees asserts:

"Most of them then come back and decide to start a new life elsewhere, away from their original settings because they cannot take part in social activities, or even get employment. I have met some returnees who used to live in Kwale but now live in areas within Nairobi, using different names, because they are unwanted back home" (JI).

Knowing how crucial acceptance is for those who are remorseful, VA1 and VA2, both village elders in their areas, emphasis this view in the regular village gatherings, youth group meetings and other forums where they address the issues of radicalization.

"With the right support and organization, and people not fearing or running away from them, the returnees can do very well. I have seen some who have come back, settled, and even married from the community, and now they are taking care of their families. It, however, came with a lot of organization with the immediate members of the family and the surrounding communities" (RL1).

Stigma also arises because there are no efforts towards encouraging reconciliation between the returnees and the communities they are going back to. This, CS3 notes, is very important, especially in settings where a member of the community feels aggrieved or affected on a more personal level by the returnee's decision to join the Al-Shabaab. Rhyn

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(2019) argues that reconciliation is a vital process in reintegration and the only way coexistence can be achieved. More importantly, she proposes that in contexts where stigma remains a significant challenge, there should be an option for the returnee to hold off revealing their identity for some time, to allow more interaction with community members and increase participation in community programmes, without the restrictions brought about by stigma. The assurance of anonymity will ensure the protection of the returnee from stigma or harm especially where reintegration takes place away from the original homes or villages of the returnees.

Negative Labelling

The terms and concepts used to discuss terrorism and counter-terrorism, can have intense implications on how communities and individuals behave and react to events and other people (Appleby, 2010). In Kenya, discourses in newspapers, public gatherings, social circles, and by newsmakers, journalists, and communities at large refer to returnees from Somalia after joining the Al-Shabaab as "terrorists" and/or extremists. Additionally, in reference to such persons, Swahili terms such as "*magaidi*", meaning 'extremists or terrorists' and "*itikadi kali*" meaning 'radicalized' are used leading to negative labelling. This includes even those that claim they were ill-informed, did not take part in terror-linked activities, and returned home because they did not subscribe to the ideals of the extremist group. R1 says:

> "They have nicknamed me "Wa *Shababu*" (A person of the Al-Shabaab). They do not call me that to my face, but that is the term used to refer to me when talking about me or anything related to me with other people. For example, my house is right next to the road, so you will hear someone tell a motorcycle operator, 'I want to alight near the Shababu's house.' Just the fact that I went to Somalia makes me an Al-Shabaab in their eyes" R1.

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At the community level, Barrinha (2010) notes that the label "terrorist" creates more than a rebel movement. It forms the notion of the 'other' and 'us versus them', whereby the 'us' looks at the 'other' as inferior and as damaging to state stability. This discourse, Barrinha asserts, is the kind that tries to create barriers between communities or groups in the same locale. The main issue is that there is no definition of the extent to which the terrorist label could apply. For returnees, the act of leaving their country to join a militant group is "terrorism". It is important to skillfully craft counter-terrorism strategies to avoid further exacerbating the problem (Appleby, 2010).

For the phrase "foreign fighting", Sexton (2017) notes that one of the major challenges today is that there is no agreed-upon definition of the phrase, and this largely makes understanding the problem an issue. It also creates inconsistencies in determining who qualifies as a terrorist fighter. Similar to the definitions of the term "terrorist", most definitions of a foreign terrorist fighter, including the widely acknowledged definition by the United Nations Security Council (2014), pose some questions as they emphasise religious motivation, travel for fighting and travel for training. Sexton states, "There is something of a paradox inherent in labelling these individuals 'foreign' because while they participate in conflicts in other countries, they pose a (perceived) risk in their 'home' State" (p.35).

Perceptions of Returnees as Crime Perpetrators

The community in most part does not trust that the returnees can change, and members continuously doubt their actions, even though they may be well-intended. R2 maintains that for any petty crime in his locale, he in most cases is always the first suspect. "When a crime happens in the locale, the returnees are always the first suspects (VA1), and they have to always live in fear, constantly looking over their shoulders (J1; J2; J4; KI2; CS2; CS4).

> "They do come and ask, 'I lost my motorbike, have you seen it?', or 'X's shop was broken into at night, are you aware who did it?' I can already see the accusations in

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their eyes. And it is the same with the police too. Sometimes I wish I had just come back silently and not told anyone" (R2).

Scholars like P2, a professor of Security studies, avows that the fear usually stems from unavailable communication channels such as radio programmes and community meetings where returnees, groups opposing returnee reintegration and community members can express their feelings and fears. Kaplan and Nussio (2012) theorize that well organised communities create an environment where ex-offenders experience less fear and greater and better support. Organized communities provide opportunities for these people to take part in communal activity and organization, mitigating any security dilemmas, if at all, and protecting them from remaining in or joining armed groups. In contrast, in communities where less social participation is present, there are higher levels of organization among ex-offenders themselves. P1, a professor with expertise in violent extremism claims:

> "It is at this point that you witness a surge in cases of organized crime because these people [returnees] need social contact. They have an individual agency to seek organization, and they seek these whenever the opportunity presents itself. They need to survive too, and the way they are doing it is by forming gangs" (P1).

In Mombasa, some gang members shot dead during robbery incidents were returnees. Security officers claimed that most of them target business owners and rob them of their money (Ahmed, 2019). Other ways to survive are through drugs trade and, some of them also act as sleeper cells. (GO2; GO3)

When Reintegration Happens in Communities with Existing Unmet Needs

Our findings point out the fact that the state and capability of a community in which a returnee is reintegrating into matters a lot. This refers to the general well-being of the

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members of that community and also on whether it has robust social structures that relate to them.

> "We should ask ourselves about the quality of the communities receiving these returnees. Is it their internal strife? joblessness? poverty? Because you find that these are the things that most probably made these returning FTFs leave. When returnees come to such societies and receive economic assistance, community resentment may set in as returnees are perceived as being favoured or singled out for assistance, while others are denied assistance" (KI1).

Gunaratna (2013) talks about tailoring programmes to suit local conditions. He points out that as long as there is a glaring divide between the socio-economic status of groups in the same community, and an environment where the fundamental social and economic grievances are overlooked, conflict will always arise. Reintegration programmes will face resistance because of discounting the core motivations to join terrorist groups. During the field research for this study, the most commonly cited reasons for why people joined the Al-Shabaab included unemployment, poverty and unfair treatment by the government. A section of study participants (60 %) from the expert interviews made connections between poverty and joining Al-Shabaab. This links closely to unemployment but also related to other issues in the coastal region such as landlessness and lack of economic opportunities. This notwithstanding the contested relationships between poverty and terrorism (Piazza, 2006, 2011).

Reports of negative stereotypes, discriminatory policies, and unfair targeting by government agents towards Muslims are rampant in coastal Kenya. Muslim religious leaders interviewed in this study noted that for a while now, profiling of young men in their mosques has been happening and they are put under intense scrutiny by government agents. Security agents accuse some of the youth of sympathising with the Al-Shabaab even when they do not. RLI is a Sheikh in Mombasa. He says:

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"Some of these people in government do not realize that even non-Muslims are being radicalized. They believe that radicalization only happens to boys in the mosque. They harass them, and their families and demand answers where there are none. We have had cases of young men being trailed by people, being arrested without charge, then later released, and some even tortured. It is traumatic" (RL1).

In response to terror attacks, sometimes security forces in Kenya have employed a dragnet approach to identify the terror suspects, leading to the arrest of hundreds of people at a go. One such incident happened in September 2003, when police arrested over 800 people in Mombasa, with many of those targeted in the arrests being Muslims, particularly ethnic Somalis and Arabs (Botha, 2013).

Badurdeen and Goldsmith (2018) note that such factors can make young Muslims feel they do not belong and cannot integrate into their society. They feel disrespected and unwanted by the government. Extremist organizations such as the Al-Shabaab feel the need for recognition by giving them roles and key positions within the organization, creating that sense of belonging and self-worth. Speckhard and Shajkovci (2019) note that "an unknown percentage of Muslims in Kenya feel they are not treated fairly by security forces, or that they do not belong in Kenya" (p. 16). GO2 is also a researcher who has done extensive work on terrorism issues in coastal Kenya. He concurs that socio-economic circumstances is what the terror groups leverage when they table their offers for recruitment.

"When the Al-Shabaab come calling, they look at these push-and-pull factors which make people unsettled. These are things like lack of jobs, a search for an identity, political and economic marginalization and land issues. Then they give offers that give a reprieve to these young people. They promise them jobs, they promise to take care of their families and give them a life where there is no inequality and discrimination" (GO2).

The Al-Shabaab has been quite adept at making use of the victim narrative in its recruitment strategies, blaming the government as the perpetrator of injustices and

discrimination, especially in the coastal areas of Mombasa, Kwale, and Lamu Island (Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2019). Badurdeen and Goldsmith (2018) agree with these sentiments, noting that the youth in these areas have unmet needs and failure to address these needs provides a conducive environment for extremist organizations to step in to satisfy these unmet needs. Ndzovu (2018) specifically speaks of unmet needs of Muslims in Kenya, including lacking access to educational opportunities and jobs, and how this if not addressed, could be an avenue for jihadi clerics to capitalise on the dissatisfaction and use the desperate Muslims for their intolerant agenda. Jihadi clerics use Islam as their political ideology. They direct provocative sermons and statements against the state, Christians and anti-jihad Muslim clerics. The infamous Sheikh Aboud Rogo was one of them.

Reintegration programmes thus need to examine conditions and dynamics that fuel radicalization, to work on reforming the criminal justice sector, and to build both social and political resilience to the influence of violent extremism. This is important because many times, the individual is often returning to the social networks in which his or her radicalization took place (Holmer & Shtuni, 2017).

Where rehabilitation and reintegration programmes involve the offering of incentives such as financial help or reduced prison sentences, Nzomo, Kagwanja, Muna, Maluki, and Kagiri, (2017) whose work focuses on the reintegration experiences in Kenya and strengthening community resilience against radicalization, propose that governments use such incentives sparingly and only where other feasible alternatives are lacking. This would reduce backlash from the community members who may feel that the criminals are being rewarded. This is an issue faced by other reintegration programmes, including in Nigeria where Clubb and Tapley (2018) note that the pressure to prioritize the resettlement the millions of people displaced by the conflict constantly frustrates reintegration efforts for former Boko Haram combatants.

There is a lot of community push-back against reintegration and questions why the government prioritizes support to those who left to join extremist groups. While the state or national government must play a role, communities must also take the lead in tackling issues

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that create grievances and hinder their ability to prosper, including poverty, and the paucity of effective leadership and representation (Nzomo, Kagwanja, Muna, Maluki, & Kagiri, 2017).

Discussion

Findings of this research, and from scholarly material focussing on CVE shows that the return of FTFs can create real or perceived problems within communities. Clubb, Barnes, O'Connor, Schewe and Davies (2019) debate public attitudes to the reintegration of terrorists, noting the need to carry out more research in order to explore attitudes to reintegration programmes, be it in counter-terrorism or Peace and Conflict studies. They argue that community acquiescence and support towards reintegration programmes play a big role in determining the rates of recidivism. This study has made substantial steps towards generating knowledge on perceptions of reintegration programmes. It discusses the experience of reintegration in Mombasa and Kwale Counties in Kenya, outlining the importance of a holistic community engagement effort in reintegration.

The findings herein do not depart from existing literature on the same issues. Gunaratna (2015) emphasizes the importance of upstream intervention, where the community is engaged by the government and government realizes the associated value. The key benefit according to Gunaratna is that it principally reduces the rates of radicalization of other members, and ultimately, the community becomes "the eyes and the ears of the state" (p.7). This is due to the fact that through joint involvement with state agencies, there is the realization of the common good and trust building.

Findings in this study show that communities in Kwale and Mombasa Counties have not actively participated in the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees. Most members of the community look at returnees suspiciously. While most of the members agree that reintegration is key, they do not know how or what their role is, in facilitating a smooth reintegration programme. This plays a part in how these same communities perceive returnees. When communities are not prepared and included in certain aspects of

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reintegration, then the returnees remain isolated. Koehler (2017) stresses the role that family and friends play in enabling reform and abandonment of destructive and dangerous behaviour. Through counselling programmes that target the family as a unit and any other concerned persons, Koehler observes that positive, pro-social relations are born that can help avert danger as long as families are not an intelligence-gathering tool.

Both governmental and non-governmental actors play a key role in drafting CVE strategies. This is the case in community policing an initiative that has played a key role in eliminating mistrust and addressing local needs. Poor relations between the police and communities in Kenya exhibit not only in the field of VE. The Kenya Police is criticized for use of excessive force, impunity, and a general disregard for democratic ideals and citizen rights (CHRIPS & APCOF, 2014). Police shootings of suspects, even when they have surrendered, and use of excessive force against protestors have all become synonymous with the Kenya Police conduct over the years. "The problem of impunity and lack of accountability in policing became even more clear during the post-election violence of 2007–2008" (p.12).

Diphoorn and Stapele (2020) note that security strategies like community policing are less effective because of the lack of trust between police and citizens. The police can extract information and assert control within a State-centric narrative and framework. The assumption among government and security agents is that community policing is a "softer" way of dealing with crime that moves away from traditional law enforcement practices. But that is not the case, and as Mulugeta and Mekuriaw (2017) argue, it is, in fact, tougher on crime because members are most times privy to some information that the police may not have, and if trusted enough with this information, then the police can respond more effectively.

Communities ultimately play a critical role in reintegration. The research findings show that how involved a community is, and how receptive members are to returnees is key in determining the success of a reintegration programme. Community acceptance is vital for the well-being of returnees and their interaction within the community. Without a supportive community, returnees cannot take part in communal activities, and this increases chances of

recidivism. Communities, if properly supported and involved in the processes, can be a source of encouragement and emotional support, encouraging the returnees to comply with supervision conditions, and avoid criminal activities. They are an essential part of the strategy to prevent recidivism.

It is key that in these processes of rehabilitation and integration, building of resilient communities is a priority in order to protect both the community and the reintegrated individual from relapsing into violence (Hettiarachchi, 2018). It is important to note that the community and family of the returnee experience the reintegration process together with the returnee. How communities are structured, and how they interact, varies. Therefore, Holmer and Shtuni (2017) note that a single model of rehabilitation and reintegration cannot be applied across cultural contexts. For programmes to have greater impact and greater legitimacy, they must be informed by a local understanding of social norms, community relationships, and cultural traditions.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Eliminate mistrust by providing host communities with timely, accurate, and unbiased information on issues about the reintegration of returnees. Also, it is important to involve impartial local and religious leaders in decision making and policy formulation for new or existing reintegration or other programmes.

In the absence of reintegration frameworks that promote dialogue and inclusivity, this study has shown that communities are likely to be distrustful of government and law enforcement agencies. Equally, they will look at reintegration programmes as initiatives imposed on the locals by the government. Civic education is also important to help families and communities to be aware of existing reintegration programmes and how they can benefit from them. Involve the local and religious leaders as the local mechanisms to organize

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reintegration and reconciliation efforts since, as this study has shown, again, various aspects of community life rely on the blessings of the traditional elders' authority.

Recommendation 2: Engage Civil Society

The level of trust in centralized institutions and the government is low in the two regions studied. Civil society actors are the people closest to the communities and programming that uses them as intermediaries might have a greater and better impact. Civil society organizations also make key partners based on their topical knowledge and local access. Building relationships between civil society and security actors would be a good start to develop information and knowledge sharing as well as joint research protocols.

Recommendation 3: Employ evidence-based practice in CVE

Research, and subsequently data, is lacking on how specific interventions work or fail in CVE in Kenya. There is need for more research and data on how communities experience integration. While there is some research on CVE interventions in coastal Kenya, there is minimal focus on the experiences of host communities on reintegration matters. Building a research base through academic partnerships will ensure localisation of solutions and that communities own reintegration processes. As Freese (2014) aptly points out, evidence is what truly tells us what is happening on the ground and without it, there is the danger of opinion, guesswork, or emotion, which can be poisonous to decision making.

Recommendation 4: Frequently evaluate reintegration programmes

Stakeholders in CVE should carry out independent evaluations to both current and new reintegration programmes. This way, the objectives, implementation, underlying assumptions and degree of success of the programmes can be assessed. This is key to ensure the design and implementation of more effective initiatives.

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Recommendation 5: Address the local structural conditions and grievances that promote radicalization

It is indeed unrealistic to overlook such issues as joblessness, poverty and other socio-economic grievances and expect meaningful reintegration outcomes. For the case of coastal Kenya, it is important to address discriminatory policies and unfair targeting by government agents towards Muslims as well as negative stereotyping. Nesting reintegration efforts and programmes into national efforts of economic, social and political reforms will promote the success of reintegration programmes.

Recommendation 6: Anchor reintegration of returnees in Kenya, on a solid policy framework

One of the major criticisms of Kenya's Amnesty and Reintegration Programme from this research is the lack of a legal structure or policy. Many other challenges are because of this, including the absence of safety assurances for returnees, mistrust between stakeholders and poor community engagement. The government, in consultation with all relevant stakeholders, should draw up a policy framework, upon which to anchor reintegration of returnees. This framework will guide on the due processes to be followed by all persons and institutions handling returnees, establish a clear chain of command and detail the step-by-step procedures of returnees' reintegration and follow-up.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate community perceptions of reintegration of returning foreign terrorist fighters from Al-Shabaab in coastal Kenya. The findings show the importance of incorporating communities into reintegration programmes as equal and respected partners, alongside government agencies, civil society and any other stakeholders. While communities in Kwale and Mombasa are receptive to the idea of returning FTFs' reintegration, there is a full range of social issues that hinders their active participation in the processes and programmes available. The government of Kenya should offer communities a platform to

share ideas, contribute to decision making, or even debate concerns on reintegration of returnees. This has built general distrust, misconceptions, and stigma towards returnees, and propagated their negative labelling.

Other than pointing out how the host communities experience reintegration, the primary contribution of this study has been to stimulate conversations for further research and exploration, which can help draw plans for wholesome reintegration for both returnees and communities. The study has shown that community involvement, participation and support are vital ingredients for reintegration, yet they remain highly underutilized in the two areas of Kwale and Mombasa Counties. The role of communities in the decision-making processes around reintegration to better address their own basic needs and those of the returnees is vital to ensure effective transitions. The National Counter Terrorism Centre should deliberate with the communities at the centre of reintegration efforts, to make state solutions more effective and ensure that the universal principles of accountability and acceptability, proactivity and any other support, are combined by those drafting reintegration programmes, to address the needs of all involved parties.

Further research should thus consider the comprehensive approach that recognizes attending to the social needs of both returnees and affected communities. Another key study area for researchers in VE should be the impact of media in creating perceptions around reintegration, and how media framing and reporting may influence perceptions. This is important because the style of media broadcasted intrinsically shapes citizen knowledge of issues happening in the country. While this article focused on the community experiences in Kwale and Mombasa only, several of the findings can apply to other contexts, locally and globally.

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Editor-in-Chief: Daniel Koehler

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