**Learning Brief: What Works to Address Violent Extremism in Kenya**

**1. Introduction**

Over the past few years, Search for Common Ground (Search) has implemented several projects in Kenya, Coastal Kenya in particular, to support countering violent extremism and other security challenges. Recently, Search implemented two projects, namely:

* Justice for Peace, which aimed to increase constructive engagement between criminal justice sector actors and communities at risk of violent extremism (VE), funded by the US Department of State’s Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism. The project started in October 2017 and was completed in October 2019; and
* Inuka! Phase II, which aims to increase the effectiveness and inclusiveness of community peace and security efforts involving vulnerable and marginalized youth in Coastal Kenya funded by the European Union. The project started in January 2018 and is expected to end in January 2021.

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| In September 2019, Search commissioned a combined evaluation with the overall purpose of determining the performance of these two projects, specifically assessing how effective they were in relation to the intended outcomes, and their impact on targeted the communities.  Lessons learned will provide a way forward for Search, partners, and other stakeholders on the design and implementation of effective and impactful P/CVE programs in the future. They are based on the findings from the evaluations of these two projects. |

**2. Background**

Attacks such as the one at the DusitD2[[1]](#footnote-1) in Nairobi and the increase of Kenyan nationals becoming terrorist foreign fighters (TFF)[[2]](#footnote-2) with groups such as Al-Shabaab indicate that the drivers of extremism and recruitment to extremist groups have not yet been sufficiently addressed. There is a need for stakeholders across Kenya to continue robust efforts to address these issues, which can be done best by addressing both push and pull factors.

While on one hand, social, political, and economic grievances have historically acted as push factors driving violent extremist activities in Kenya,[[3]](#footnote-3) on the other hand, the emergence of extremists groups such as Al-Shabaab and the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC) who spread ideology and propaganda through religious teachings have effectively tapped into local grievances and pulled some citizens from trusting their government to conducting coordinated and so-called ‘lone wolf’ attacks in their country.[[4]](#footnote-4),[[5]](#footnote-5)

The initial approach by the Government of Kenya to counter violent extremism activities was securitized and reactive to every incident related to or with elements of VE. Rather than helping to address the problem, this heavy-handed approach also pulled more Kenyans into violent extremism and radicalization[[6]](#footnote-6). However, in recent years, the approach to addressing violent extremism has shifted in Kenya and the government’s handling of violent extremism issues has changed, making it more inclusive of other stakeholders and focused on preventing and countering the problem. More significantly, local P/CVE strategies have also been officially adopted in several counties in Kenya.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This change has also marked a change for stakeholders such as Search, who have shifted their approaches to these issues. Efforts now focus mainly on addressing violent extremism by building community resilience to violent extremist activities and radicalization. In doing so, Search has been using its Transforming Violent Extremism (TVE) approach.[[8]](#footnote-8)

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| TVE looks to shift how people engage and how grievances are addressed. It relies on four pillars:   * Prevention: empowering communities’ ability to use non-violent means to address their grievances; * Disengagement: supporting individuals who choose non-violence as an alternative; * Effective state responses: assisting governments to work with other stakeholders; * Credible and constructive narratives: encouraging non-violent approaches and alternative pathways.[[9]](#footnote-9) |

While implementing these two projects, Search first engaged with the government through the justice sector and at-risk communities to address justice-drivers of violent extremism to find a common understanding between the two. Likewise, Search also engaged with vulnerable youth and adults, including leadership in the communities, to improve the inclusiveness of community peace and security efforts by involving both youth and adults in decision making processes.

Overall, although these efforts to a large extent have produced positive results in targeted communities, the evaluation found that a wider and more vigorous approach is needed to ensure a vibrant society free from VE and terrorism.

**3. Lessons Learned**

The following lessons learned were identified from the findings of the two projects’ combined evaluation, which should be integrated in future efforts to design and implement initiatives to counter violent extremism and, more broadly, promote peace in Kenya: These are:

* **Coordination between NGOs in implementing peacebuilding projects is necessary**. Although there is some evidence that NGOs are communicating with each other in Coastal Kenya, there is little evidence that they are coordinating to implement peacebuilding projects to avoid duplication. The challenge of project/activity duplication is two-fold. It results in fatigue in targeted communities, and also contributes to failure of understanding real impact of a project/program on the community targeted, hence it is difficult to identify strengths and weaknesses of the project for future programming. During this evaluation, for instance, despite the contribution of the Inuka project to the targeted communities, there were already some positive changes happening before the project. This made it difficult for the evaluation to determine how impactful some project activities were. If there was good coordination, Search would have tailored its activities to address other issues rather than repeating or implementing activities, resulting in less impact on the community. In the future, therefore, Search and other stakeholders should develop a coordination structure which will help organizations identify gaps, prevent overlap, and ensure stakeholder activities are synchronized to achieve common objectives. This approach will enable coherence, effectiveness, and efficiency in peacebuilding projects in Kenya.
* **There is a need to engage with the authorities to conduct an assessment of peacebuilding projects in Coastal Kenya**. Stemming from the above lesson learned, Search should coordinate an assessment of peacebuilding projects, including addressing violent extremism, with the government. This will help to determine what works and what does not work, and what should be done in the future. This will also be an opportunity for Search and stakeholders to effectively involve the government. The evaluation learned that the government intends to evaluate the programs done by NGOs dealing with CVE to determine to what extent the programs have contributed to the current situation.
* **Information technology (IT) can add value and strengthen the relationship between communities and security agencies**. Search should continue to use these platforms as a means of building trust and improving relationships through sharing information and communication between security agencies and communities. The evaluation learned that communities and security agencies effectively interact through platforms such as WhatsApp to discuss social issues and share experiences on issues beyond security, which in turn improves their relationship. In future programming, Search should consider investing more in IT platforms by adopting an approach which structures the platform as appropriate to coastal Kenya and more importantly, invest in technology which is commonly used by a majority of community members.
* **Peacebuilding grants should be refined to be more sustainable**. Grants provided under peacebuilding projects, including the grants provided by Search during these two projects, are very effective and impactful to the population they reach. Grants provide an opportunity for communities to design activities based on their social context at the grassroots, and also create a sense of ownership of outcomes. Nevertheless, despite the effectiveness and impact of grants, challenges remain. Peacebuilding grants are not sustainable because the project end also marks the end of these grants. There is a need for Search and other peacebuilding stakeholders, including donors, to design future grants which are “self-sustaining,” reflecting a more “business oriented” model. Grants should be designed in a way that the recipient of the grant can use part of the grant for investment in a business or to run an activity to generate profit. Part of the profit can then be directed toward the intended initiative. Later on, some of the profit coming from the business or activity can be saved for expanding the business and some can be used to continue to implement peacebuilding initiatives. This strategy would be more effective in terms of sustainability and impact by enabling communities to continue to implement activities after the end of the project. It can also ensure more grassroots community members are reached, deepening the impact of the initiatives.
* **Effort should focus on engaging with and empowering grassroots CSOs.** Search and other stakeholders should focus on engaging with grassroots CSOs to ensure they are empowered to implement peacebuilding initiatives. If empowered, grassroots CSOs are in a strong position to influence or effect changes in their communities because communities know and trust them more than CSOs from outside their community. The evaluation found that after being empowered through grants, the CSOs had a positive, but limited impact. Future programming should consider engaging with these CSOs and empowering them in terms of building their technical and operational capacity to ensure effective collaborators and local partners, and also locate funds to sustain themselves.
* **Peacebuilding projects should be designed to align with already existing structures.** Search and partners should design their programs to utilize already existing structures or activities by authorities or communities. The evaluation found that by engaging with structures such as Court User Committees-CUCs and the security system through Mvuvi cards, Search and partners were able to effectively engage with the government on key security issues. For future programming, this should be a necessary component while designing project activities. Search and partners, for instance, should structure their activities reflecting the Kenya Terrorism Act, Kenya CVES, National Action Plan, and important county plans and strategies.
* **Peacebuilding projects should be designed in a way that stakeholders at the national level, including the national government are engaged**. The engagement with national stakeholders remains to be crucial in influencing changes and for sustainability. Search and stakeholders in the future should design programs which link the efforts at the grassroots to the national level. This could be done by involving the government in aspects which relate to security of Kenyans, since the government is the custodian of peace and security of its people. This involvement will increase government confidence toward projects and CSOs, creating more buy-in at the national level. Search could use the approach used with the Mvuvi cards in Inuka phase two, where CSOs followed government security requirements to implement the Mvuvi Card. This compromise resulted in the national level government being fully engaged; now the program impact has been amplified and had reached more community members in Lamu.
* **Peacebuilding programs should continue to engage with communities through dialogues**. Dialogues have proven to be the most effective way of addressing differences between adversary groups in communities. More importantly, the engagement should focus on Search’s “single and *multi-stakeholder community dialogues*” approach, where the community members engage separately, then together, with the idea that the first engagement prepares stakeholders by building their capacity to understand issues and challenges facing one another and ensuring they interact in a constructive way. The focus on the common ground approach also makes sure they have positive, rather than adversarial engagements in the second, multi stakeholder phase. In context of Kenya where there are often misunderstandings between community members and security agencies, this engagement will ensure peacebuilding and countering violent extremism projects effectively and efficiently address these issues.
* **A strong gender strategy remains to be a very important aspect in building resilience to violent extremism.** Research suggests that women’s participation in peace negotiations increases the durability and quality of peace. Recognizing the critical role women can play in addressing peace, Search has always strived for a better strategy to engage more with females. The current engagement used by Search, where females are engaged separately and in a spaces such as women’s groups or mosques where they feel comfortable and safe, has proven to be effective. Nevertheless, Search and other stakeholders in the future should consider having specific monitoring of gender mainstreaming during the project to fully understand where the strategy is effective and where it can still be improved.

**4. Conclusion**

The lessons learned drawn from recent Search activities in Kenya provides insight on best practices and strategies in addressing security challenges, including P/CVE. Overall, Search’s TVE approach, which focuses on addressing conflicts before they turn into violence and encourages parties in conflict to see common ground, is vital in designing peacebuilding programming. This approach has been effective in addressing misunderstandings between communities and the security sector, police in particular. It has built a relationship between sectors and people with different statuses in the community. It should be adapted for other peacebuilding programming aiming to address security challenges, including radicalization, violent extremism and terrorism in communities

1. [DusitD2 hotel attack death toll rises to 21"](https://www.nation.co.ke/news/Death-toll-in-DusitD2-attack-rises-to-21/1056-4938600-ukg1u2z/index.html). *Daily Nation*. 16 January 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ["Special Report: In Africa, a militant group's growing appeal"](https://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/30/us-shabaab-east-africa-idUSBRE84T0NI20120530) reports that an estimated 10% of Al-Shabaab militants are Kenyan nationals <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-shabaab-east-africa/special-report-in-africa-a-militant-groups-growing-appeal-idUSBRE84T0NI20120530> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Radicalization in Kenya Recruitment to al-Shabaab and the Mombasa Republican Council”, Botha, Anneli, Institute for

   Security Studies, Paper 265 (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Radicalization in Kenya Recruitment to al-Shabaab and the Mombasa Republican Council”, Botha, Anneli, Institute for Security Studies, Paper 265 (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “[Al Shabaab in Kenya: Emerging Dynamics and Shifts](https://www.crisis.acleddata.com/al-shabaab-in-kenya-august-2015-update/)”, ACLED, August 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “[African governments, not religion, are pushing their young people into extremism](https://qz.com/africa/1072841/boko-haram-al-shabaab-and-al-qaedas-young-extremists-are-being-created-by-violent-african-governments/.)”, Quartz Africa, 8 September 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism”, Government of Kenya, 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “[Transforming Violent Extremism](https://www.sfcg.org/transforming-violent-extremism-peacebuilders-guide/)”, Search for Common Ground, August 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-9)