

Preventing violent extremism in Africa: Exploring new approaches and home-grown solutions

Cheryl Hendricks and Patrick Hajayandi

Introduction

The shift of global terrorism from the Middle East to the Sahel region has situated Africa as the 'global epicentre of violent extremism'.¹ The Sahel accounted for half of all terrorism-related deaths in 2023, and Burkina Faso ranks at the top of the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) for the impact of terrorism. Ten of the top 20 countries listed in the GTI are in Africa: Burkina Faso, Mali, Somalia, Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Kenya and Egypt. An increasing number of countries are impacted by the insecurity generated by violent extremists across Africa, with at least 25 countries being affected. According to the 2023 GTI, from 2007 to 2022, the region went from accounting for only 1% to 43% of the global total terrorism-linked deaths.² The Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS), Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP), Boko Haram, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Shabaab (Somalia), Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar al-Din and Ahl al-Sunnah wa al Jamma'ah (ASWJ) are just some of the violent extremist groups currently operative on the continent. They exist along with hundreds of other militia groups operative in localities across the continent.

The prevalence of violent extremist groups, and the rise in fatalities related to violent extremism, harm the social, economic and political stability of the

countries affected by it. Violent extremism impacts investment, tourism, employment, food security, transnational organised crime, livelihoods and, more recently, can be linked to the political fragility and spate of coups in West Africa.

The proliferation of violent extremism has occurred despite the presence of multinational counter-insurgency and/or peace enforcement contingents, for example, the Barkhane Operation – a French-led counterinsurgency operation – the multinational special forces Task Force Takuba, the troops operating under the G5 Sahel banner and the Southern African Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM).³ However, people have grown weary of the failed imported counterinsurgency strategies.

Many practitioners and policymakers are searching for alternative peacebuilding approaches and have long recognised the underlying development, human rights and governance drivers of conflict. The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) *Journey to Extremism: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement* emphasises the need to deal constructively with the structural and individual issues (e.g. education, unemployment, service delivery, human rights abuses) that function as push and pull factors towards extremism.⁴ Many of the current gaps in preventing violent extremism (PVE)

can be addressed in the short to medium term and can disincentivise further recruitment, promote exit and produce more sustainable solutions to peacebuilding. These measures should be the focus of attention as we seek to balance short-term security responses and long-term development and governance challenges.

Violent extremism typically takes root in remote areas, often where 'borderlands' connect two or more states and where there have been intergenerational experiences of marginalisation

Drawing on data collected during field research conducted by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in Nigeria, Kenya and Mozambique, this brief looks at how these governments have sought to respond to the threat of violent extremism. We place particular emphasis on the approaches they adopted and the lessons learned. The brief argues that there is a need to explore innovative, contextually relevant and gender-sensitive approaches in close collaboration with the affected communities. An approach must be proffered that seeks to find a balance between dealing with the very real hard security threats; the need to create opportunities for negotiations and dialogue; demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR); transitional justice; as well as addressing some of the challenges of development and governance. This policy brief particularly explores how broad transitional justice processes can increase the effectiveness of approaches to preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE).

Drivers of violent extremism in Africa

The drivers of violent extremism in Africa are rooted in a complex interplay of global, national, local and personal factors. These include: the spread of Al Qaeda and Daesh (Islamic State) to Africa as spaces for their operations became curtailed in the Middle East; structural challenges of African states, namely weak, kleptocratic, patronage-based states dominated by elite interests; human rights abuses by security sector personnel; porous borders; pervasive

insecurity; underdevelopment; lack of education, human dignity and access to opportunities; and local grievances of marginalisation and a sense of not belonging. Studies have shown that extreme poverty, unemployment and lack of economic opportunities are pull factors for the recruitment of members by extremist groups.⁵ Religion is a factor, but it is not the primary pull factor – it serves as a mobiliser.

The UNDP's report *Journey to Extremism in Africa* shows that violent extremism typically takes root in remote areas,⁶ often where 'borderlands' connect two or more states and where there have been intergenerational experiences of marginalisation, such as northern Mali, north-eastern Nigeria, northern Mozambique and the Kenyan coastal region. While violent extremist groups 'may logistically exploit relatively "ungoverned" terrain, they have also developed compelling narratives that speak to the grievances of communities living in neglected circumstances'.⁷

Community grievances often relate to socio-economic disparities which occur along ethnic lines, elite greed, illicit economies and a general lack of education and development. Research conducted by the IJR in Nigeria, Kenya and Mozambique came to similar conclusions about the drivers of extremism in these countries.⁸ The affected communities have long-standing political and socio-economic grievances, some of which can be traced to the colonial era. High rates of poverty, unemployment, socio-economic inequality, exclusion, corruption, ethnic and religious intolerance, local and transnational organised crime and human rights violations – often in the context of police brutality and an excessive use of force to silence dissenting voices – all coalesce to form a context in which violence becomes the dominant language for seeking transformation and where alternative forms of coexistence become sought after.⁹

In northern Mozambique, unemployment, natural resource exploitation, land grabbing, and decades of political and economic marginalisation all contributed to the formation of Ansar al-Sunna (al-Shabaab). The trigger factor was, however, the local population's exclusion from benefitting from the discovery and exploitation of rubies in Montepuez and liquefied natural gas off the coast of the Rovuma Basin.¹⁰ In Kenya's northern region, poor infrastructure development, lack of employment opportunities, access to land and discrimination are cited as some of the key drivers of violent extremism.¹¹

These local conditions provide an opportunity structure for violent extremism as it thrives in conditions where local grievances are present. Often violent extremist groups are able to offer communities some form of basic services, access to 'employment' and the idea of an alternative form of governance rooted in fundamentalist ideologies. Global terrorist groups often make use of local leaders/groups who become affiliated to the global violent extremist organisations. Violent extremist groups are therefore not transplanted wholesale from the Middle East to Africa. Rather, local militia groups appear to mutate into violent extremism. Given the hundreds of militia groups dotted all over Africa, this is a worrying scenario. Moreover, violent extremism appears in effect to be a new form of resistance to exploitation and abuse on the African continent. If not effectively addressed, it will continue to spread across Africa.

Responses to violent extremism

Traditional responses

'The war on terrorism' emerged as a response to the 9/11 terror attack on the World Trade Center in New York.¹² It was characterised as a global military campaign to root out violent extremists by lethal force. It also used a binary discourse of 'us' and 'them', condemning the actions and delegitimising the causes of violent extremism. Responses to violent extremism on the African continent have been influenced by this global trend – the dominance of the hard power and security-oriented action towards insurgencies and a stance of 'non-negotiation with terrorists'.

The African Union (AU) has adopted a number of legal frameworks on and formed organs to deal with P/CVE. These include the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism (1999), which requires state parties to criminalise terrorist action under their national law; the AU Protocol to the OAU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism (2004); the Plan of Action of the AU High-Level Inter-Governmental Meeting on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism in Africa (2002); and bodies such as the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism in Africa (ACSRT; Centre Africain d'Etudes et de Recherches sur le Terrorisme, or CAERT). In theory, these should be able to provide a comprehensive response to violent extremism. However, in practice, responses have been rather limited towards peace enforcement.

The AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), deployed since March 2007, was credited with some successes, including a reduction of the area controlled by al-Shabaab and protection of Somalia's transitional government and electoral processes. However, the mission, which later mutated into the African Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), has not achieved a decisive victory over the extremist movement, which has regained swathes of Somalian territory.¹³ According to Paul Williams,

AMISOM made progress on three strategic objectives, which include: reducing the threat posed by al-Shabaab and other armed groups; providing security to enable Somalia's political process and efforts to reconcile; handing over security responsibilities to Somali security forces. However, AMISOM has not been able to resolve Somalia's fundamental problem, which is the crisis of governance that has spawned al-Shabaab and other forms of opposition to the government.¹⁴

The mission will be drawing down by December 2024 and there are fears of a resurgence of al-Shabaab. As will be recalled, the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan in 2021 led to the resumption of power by the Taliban after 20 years. Fears of a similar recapturing of the state by al-Shabaab loom large.

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The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was accompanied by several military deployments, including the French Barkhane Operation, the African G5 Sahel and the European Task Force Takuba. Addressing security concerns has been at the centre of the interventions in Mali. Professor Moda Dieng notes that when the G5 Sahel was deployed in 2017 by a coalition of five African countries (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Mauritania), the intervention was considered the

most popular initiative in the fight against insecurity in the Sahel as it brought hope in the fight against violent extremism and organised crime.¹⁵

However, it appears that these operations were focused on a state-centric approach to security which only managed to prevent the collapse of the central government. They did not translate into security for the populations.¹⁶ Other missions across the continent have had similar results without resolving the security challenge posed by extremists. These interventions are thus proving to be a double-edged sword, as they are keeping regimes in power but simultaneously appearing to obfuscate the need for regimes to address the drivers of conflict.¹⁷

New home-grown approaches

The limitations of kinetic approaches have been evident for a while and have been augmented by approaches that include a focus on human rights, development, governance and gender and that are more inclusive of the varied actors engaged in preventing violent extremism. The UNDP advocates for a ‘whole of society’ community-level centred approach which includes women and youth. Many of the country PVE action plans now also include a focus on governance and economic development and the need to draw in an array of different local actors.

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For example, the Kenyan National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism calls for state (government ministries and the National Centre for Counter Terrorism) and non-state actors (civil society, religious leaders and international partners) to cooperate in countering extremism. The PVE National Action Plan (NAP), which is further cascaded into localised county NAPs, includes a focus on the media, psychosocial support, education, arts and culture as well as the traditional focus on security, legal and policy frameworks and capacity building.¹⁸

The action plans provide clear platforms for knowledge sharing, assign responsibilities for action,

promote collaboration and avoid a duplication of responsibility. They have also developed trust between communities and government stakeholders, such as through community policing efforts, engagement with religious leaders, and the development of educational and vocational training schemes to address issues of unemployment.

There are instances where more creative models are used for demobilising violent extremists, as well as recognising the importance of dialogue with extremists and implementing transitional justice as part of the effective reintegration of violent extremists and the healing of societies. The Borno State exit model in northern Nigeria is a case in point, and departs from the UNDP Operation Safe Corridor for high-risk defectors from Boko Haram. This initiative involves screening, prosecutions, rehabilitation through de-radicalisation programmes, psychosocial support, vocational training courses and reintegration back into original communities.¹⁹

As a proactive way to deal with the security and economic crisis that his state was facing, the governor of Borno, Babagana Zulum, established the Borno State Security Trust Fund as a vehicle for funding the reconstruction of infrastructure, expanding state security and managing the flow of small arms and light weapons in the region. This was an effective means to restore commercial activities in Maiduguri and created job opportunities, including for ‘repentant’ combatants. Demobilisation was encouraged through a ‘cash for guns’ strategy that led to a wave of mass defections. In January 2023, a reported 93 000 had voluntarily exited areas controlled by Boko Haram.²⁰

The state government developed the Borno model for managing the mass surrender situation. Low-risk former Boko Haram associates, predominantly women, were resettled in their communities. Other ‘repentants’ were encamped as community-based reconciliation and reintegration efforts were being developed (including the formation of community-based reconciliation and reintegration committees) and as dialogues with the receiving communities and with former combatants were undertaken.

Nigeria has also made use of community-based security structures – the Civilian Joint Task Force – to assist with the provisioning of local security and the demobilisation of former combatants. A large part of the strategy is also to use former Boko Haram associates to encourage others to demobilise. A Transitional Justice Policy was also developed but

has yet to be implemented. An analysis of the effectiveness of this Borno exit model should be undertaken given the large scale and protracted nature of the insurgencies across Africa.

The creation of dialogue platforms for regular exchange between community members and government authorities is important to jointly develop and implement reintegration and transitional justice responses. Nigeria has started exploring this option but has to do much more if its large-scale reintegration process is to be successful. Many civil society organisations would need to assist with facilitating these dialogues. Repentance, forgiveness, reparations, acceptance and memorialisation are part of the process of healing a traumatised society. It is not clear to what extent these aspects have been undertaken in Borno State.

Transitional justice is the glue that will cement this large-scale peacebuilding process. It also has to be accompanied by gainful employment for both ex-combatants and community members. Moreover, there has to be a dialogue with those in command structures in order to end the war. If these latter aspects are not addressed, there is likely to be a circulation of 'repentants' back to extremism. We are also likely to see a deepening of the already existing trust gap between government and community, government and ex-combatants, and ex-combatants and communities.

For its part, Mozambique is still predominantly using an approach that seeks to 'neutralise' violent extremists. However, from the focus group discussions that the IJR's research team had in Cabo Delgado in 2023, it was clear that communities were seeking a different solution to the challenge that included dialogue with the insurgents, effective models of community policing, adherence to human

rights, accountability standards, inclusive and participatory decision making and the delivery of basic services.²¹

Mozambique has sufficient experience with disarmament, demobilisation, repatriation, reintegration and resettlement (DDRRR) programmes to develop its own in relation to incentivising defections and for reintegration. It should, in consultation with communities, begin to co-create a strategy for DDRRR in relation to al-Shaabab in the north. Here, too, it is important to have a transitional justice approach so that healing of the trauma of the many different wars that have affected the north can take place.

Conclusion

There is a need to invest in home-grown approaches to preventing violent extremism. There is no one-size-fits-all approach that can work in the different contexts in which violent extremism proliferates. Although it is evident that security responses are a 'band-aid' and piecemeal, they remain the dominant response by governments. However, more innovative local-level responses are coming to the fore, as is evident in Borno.

These approaches have both strengths and weaknesses in that they appear to work for mass defection, but there has been far less emphasis on the transitional justice approaches that must accompany new reintegration models and the need for dialogue with those in the command structures of violent extremist groups, those who have defected, and with communities which have borne the brunt of the atrocities committed by these groups. In the end, it is about fashioning new social contracts within the societies that are afflicted by violent extremism.

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The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR), established in 2000, is a pan-African organisation that works collaboratively with governments, inter-governmental and civil society actors to contribute towards building fair, democratic and inclusive societies across the continent, through transitional justice and peacebuilding interventions. The IJR's work is informed by the insights gained from working with governmental stakeholders and grassroots communities in countries such as Burundi, Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, South Sudan, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Historically, the IJR has worked on interventions in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda and Uganda. Internationally, the IJR has provided strategic and technical advice to stakeholders in Colombia, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, UK and USA.

The IJR is a trusted advisor to key decision makers and inter-governmental actors on transitional justice and peacebuilding initiatives, and engages with the AU, Southern African Development Community, EAC, Intergovernmental Authority on Development, International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, European Union and the United Nations (UN) system. The IJR has partnered with the UN Development Programme (UNDP) on a number of in-country interventions in Africa. On this basis, in 2021, the IJR was tasked by the UNDP to develop its Guidelines on Mental Health, Psychosocial Support and Peacebuilding. The IJR has positioned itself as a provider of choice of reliable qualitative data on public perception in the areas of peace and security. The pioneering South African Reconciliation Barometer enables the IJR to be the leading African think tank in terms of providing public opinion data in these areas. We welcome collaboration with like-minded partners and invite you to find out more about our work on our website: www.ijr.org.za.

The IJR expresses its appreciation to the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and the Swedish government for its generous support to the Institute. This publication was made possible by the generous funding of the Open Society Foundations. The views expressed in this policy brief remain those of the author.



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