

The Role of Education in Countering Violent Extremism

Meeting Note
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In recent years, the role of education in countering violent extremism (CVE) has gained prominence among policymakers and practitioners. Tackling violent extremism through education is reflective of a broader international shift toward terrorism prevention and the need to identify the enabling environment for extremists to disseminate their ideologies and recruit supporters. Such a comprehensive approach is underscored by the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy as well as the work of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), particularly through its CVE Working Group. A product of the GCTF, Hedayah—the International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism, established in Abu Dhabi— has listed education as one of its key strategic priorities for 2013 and 2014.

On 18-19 September 2013, the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation (CGCC) and Hedayah co-hosted in New York City an expert roundtable on the “Role of Education in Countering Violent Extremism.” The meeting brought together a group of policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to discuss challenges and best practices related to efforts to counter violent extremism through education. The meeting included experts from the United Kingdom, Nigeria, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the United States. In order to inform current and future CVE programming and good practices, participants shared experiences and lessons learned from their fields of work, including sports and culture, community engagement, and rehabilitation.

Building on this meeting, and to raise awareness and policy level support for the topic, Hedayah and the Permanent Mission of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations hosted in New York City a high-level meeting on 25 September 2013 on the sidelines of the 68th UN General Assembly. On this occasion, CGCC’s Executive Director, Alistair Millar, presented his remarks on the role of educational institutions as incubators and mitigators of violent extremism and shared key findings from the earlier expert roundtable. Hedayah’s CEO, Maqsood Kruse, also introduced the topic of sports, arts and culture in education, and emphasized that it was important to provide youth with positive alternatives to violent extremism. The combination of the high-level meeting and the expert-level meeting set the stage for future activities and programs on this subject.

Among the experts there was general agreement on how a quality education in itself can play a critical role in helping young people distance themselves from extremism and resist the ‘pull factors,’ that may drive them to recruitment. These pull factors can be contrasted by education through awareness raising, generating respect for others, and creating and maintaining cultures of peace and dialogue. However, the experts also stressed that quality education alone is not sufficient to prevent violent extremism, and that all education is not CVE work. Participants identified cases where highly educated individuals have gone on to commit acts of violent extremism. Thus, in addition to providing quality education, more

broadly effective education policies and interventions with the specific goal of countering violent extremism should be focused on communities where youth are vulnerable to violent extremism and specifically tailored to fit the local context.

Throughout the different discussions, three broad and repeated themes were identified and underscored by governments and practitioners alike: people, programs, and policies. In building community resilience against violent extremism, participants stressed the importance of utilizing existing networks, resources (human and material), and programs, which could be further strengthened by informed, well-designed, and inclusive policies.

People

There was widespread agreement among the participants that effective CVE and education programming is not only about the content of the curriculum; it is also about fostering relationships between people and their communities in order to ensure a safe, collaborative, and constructive environment. The most influential actors included: teachers, families, students, and local community leaders (including the private sector). The engagement of these actors was deemed essential to ensuring the sustainability of efforts and some continuity during and after school hours.

Building effective partnerships

Participants agreed that building effective partnerships between the education sector and the greater community (including law enforcement agencies) may help to develop opportunities for students to engage in positive activities in their communities, and may create a sense of shared responsibility for their safety and development. Building effective partnerships was seen as important in developing resilience to the divisive narratives expounded by extremist groups. Within the primary and secondary school systems, building effective partnerships also means educating and supporting practitioners inside the educational establishments in addressing issues such as faith, culture, and radical political thought. Religious and cultural community leaders, law enforcement officers, and topical experts have a vital role in providing necessary support for the education system where they are able.

Educational institutions can play a role in facilitating community dialogue and strengthening the relationship between institutions and their communities. Universities, for example, could provide an independent “safe” space where community actors could voice their concerns, discuss pressing issues, and solve problems. It was emphasized that involving families and the broader community in the education system is crucial. Educational institutions, with support from the private sector, could also utilize their space after school hours to reach out to students’ families and communities through continuing education programs or activities, for example through the provision of informal literacy classes or vocational training, or using spaces available to support community activities, such as town hall meetings. The experience of practitioners in several regions indicated that bringing families and communities into the school environment could serve to create common goals and increase support for education overall.

CGCC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan policy institute dedicated to strengthening International counterterrorism cooperation. It works to improve counterterrorism cooperation and capacity through collaborative research and policy analysis and by providing practical advice. CGCC is working to improve intergovernmental cooperation at the global, regional, and subregional levels; support community-led efforts to counter violent extremism; ensure respect for human rights and the rule of law; and empower civil society and victims of terrorism to speak out.

Hedayah is the International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism, established in Abu Dhabi through the GCTF. Hedayah was established to serve as the premier international institution for training and capacity building, dialogue, collaboration, and research to counter violent extremism in all of its forms and manifestations, in support of long-term, global efforts to prevent and counter terrorism.

Ensuring credibility

Along with building effective partnerships, the experts at this meeting discussed the need to build and strengthen trust—between governments and educational institutions, and between schools and communities. One participant noted that educators, police officers, community members, and other relevant stakeholders need to be seen by the community as trustworthy, especially to youths who may be more vulnerable to violent extremism. Trust is especially important for regions where teachers and law enforcement officials are the government’s only front-line workers; poor performance by educators or law enforcement officials may exacerbate the community’s grievances and frustrations, and decrease the community’s resilience against violent extremism. Participants also stressed that it is important that CVE programs are viewed as a means of supporting the well-being of the community, rather than as means of monitoring or gathering information against communities. It was generally suggested that engagement should take place through credible interlocutors who are connected both to the community and target audiences.

Programs

Experts at the roundtable shared insights and experiences, as well as recommendations, regarding programs and activities through which CVE issues may be raised within an education framework.

Encouraging diverse interests

Experts stressed the importance of a well-rounded educational experience that encourages creative thinking and curiosity for a diverse range of interests. This type of learning, according to the participants, increases exposure to diversity, critical thinking, and collaboration. Educational institutions, particularly universities, represent a battleground of ideas where many different ideologies, opinions, and viewpoints are shared and debated. Curricula and school programs that promote this type of healthy exchange of ideas could encourage students to broaden their horizons, think critically, and become more self-aware.

However, some participants cautioned that this kind of open environment could also risk allowing violent extremist ideologies to flourish. To balance this, it was suggested that schools could enhance their curricula by engaging with youth outside the classroom. For example, sports, art, drama, theatre, clubs, debate teams, and other after-school programs, specifically designed for a particular subset of vulnerable youth, could help them develop positive interests and promote a sense of self-worth and self-confidence.

Raising awareness about CVE and education, and vice versa

While many participants recognized the importance of education in CVE, some cautioned against the idea of “injecting” CVE policy into curricula and were concerned that programming around CVE and education would backfire due to wariness around “hard” counterterrorism measures. In order to correct misunderstandings about the CVE concept and distinguish it from “hard” counterterrorism measures, others suggested embarking on awareness-raising campaigns that could explain the purpose of countering violent extremism and how it relates to broader educational goals, and explore how educational institutions and all other relevant education actors could play a role in its practice. However, participants also cautioned that teachers who do not have the proper support or tools to address CVE could actually cause more harm than good. Further, teachers are already burdened with many challenges, and adding a complex topic such as countering violent extremism to their curricula may actually hinder their ability to recognize signs of radicalization. Therefore, it was suggested that CVE lessons should be integrated into existing curricula in an intelligible and easily digestible way where it is addressed as one of the many risky behaviors or dangers affecting youth.

Inspiring civic responsibility

Academic practitioners and policymakers both agreed widely that including a civic education and citizenship responsibility component in curricula could equip students with the social and communication skills necessary to address their grievances in a positive, nonviolent way. Civic responsibility and citizenship may also build a shared sense of culture within a society that consists of a diverse mix of ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. However, it was noted that in some countries and regions, implementing or even justifying the need for civic education in curricula could be challenging. In some instances, parents may place a high value on a select group of subjects, such as mathematics and science, believing that careers such as engineering and medicine are in higher demand. As a result the pursuit of subjects like civic studies or “social studies” and the humanities are discouraged. To overcome this challenge it was suggested that schools, with support from businesses and local governments, could try to engage families in community service activities to cultivate a sense of civic responsibility outside the classroom.

Enhancing critical thinking skills

Enhancing logic, problem solving, and critical thinking skills of young people was seen as a vital element in preventing violence and extremism. Empowering students to think critically teaches them to challenge ideas, construct rational thoughts, and engage in meaningful debate. Several participants believed that programs that support critical thinking skills should be integrated into educational curricula in primary school—that introducing these skills in secondary school or at the university level was too late. One participant noted that basic developmental testing of a particular subset of young violent extremists revealed that most of the children lacked basic logic and problem-solving skills.

In countries where there are many languages, it was suggested that one type of CVE intervention could be the development of curricula in the children’s mother tongue. Rather than obligating students to learn a whole new language during their critical years of development, teaching in a familiar language could help encourage the development of logic and problem-solving skills.

Promoting cultural initiatives

Participants agreed that cultural learning is crucial for youths as it enhances their self-awareness and identity, while also opening their minds to different customs, practices, and traditions, and promotes comparative analysis. Participants suggested that another possible CVE intervention that promotes cultural learning would be to provide translations of critical texts, popular novels, and storybooks in students' mother tongue. For parochial schools, allowing students access to translated religious texts would help deepen the understanding of their religion and empower them to challenge extremist narratives that use religious rhetoric to justify violence.

Schools could also support local and national cultural heritage programs, such as plays, arts, and cultural shows which could help students challenge preexisting notions and develop their imaginative and strategic capacities. Some participants suggested that one way of doing this could include providing space for interaction between students and prominent local artists, writers, and musicians, for example, and encourage youths to become involved in cultural activities both inside and outside the classroom. In addition, film and cultural festivals can help bridge gaps between different communities through shared experiences and cross-cultural dialogue. It is important to note that these cultural exchanges alone, however, may not prevent violent extremism, but they do have the possibility of building future resilience against violent extremism in areas where deep cultural divides and polarizing rhetoric have historically increased tension and promoted violent extremism.

Engagement through sports

Sports, in particular, was highlighted as an important positive outlet for youths as it fosters teamwork, social, and leadership skills, and promotes goal-setting and instills a sense of identity and belonging—many of the factors that violent extremists prey on to recruit youths into their organizations. In fact, one participant pointed out that terrorist organizations such as al-Qaida have historically used sports as one way to entice youth to join their training camps and build camaraderie among existing recruits. Sports also creates opportunities to address other factors that may lead to violent extremism, such as health and safety, gender inequalities, and conflict resolution in a setting where learning is interactive and viewed as “fun.”

Nevertheless, some participants cautioned that while sports may be a good medium for learning, it can also promote undue competition among students and create unnecessary conflict. Some professional sports players may also be poor role models of sportsmanship or conflict resolution. It is therefore important for teachers and coaches to set positive examples for students and help foster positive attitudes, good sportsmanship, and teamwork. Through these different activities, youths could realize their potential and not be confined to a single identity, such as their religion or ethnic background, for example.

Policy

It was broadly recognized that undertaking CVE through education would require support at the local and national political levels, and that policies play a strong role in creating a balanced framework for engagement on these issues.

Generating support for CVE in education

Ensuring the support of policymakers for education/CVE initiatives was deemed critical for success, particularly as in many regions, community-initiated projects depend on some political support or space for implementation. Moreover, in conflict-affected areas, basic security is a prerequisite that needs to be provided by governmental authorities in order to carry out educational programs. It was noted that in some regions, if the policy initiatives are derived from a security-related office or ministry, programs are more likely to generate broader governmental support and resources for implementation. In other regions, communities and civil society actors might take the lead in developing projects and raising funds, but still require some policy support to ensure the sustainability of programming and, for example, their integration into broader educational systems.

Developing targeted and evidence-based education policies

Violent extremism is a complex problem that requires complex solutions, of which education could be one tool in the CVE toolbox. While some educational concepts are universal and transferable, it is crucial that policies are targeted, context-specific, and based on detailed research rather than assumptions. For instance, some participants cautioned against conflating religious education with radical ideologies and violent extremism. In fact, participants noted that while religious schools are often blamed for generating religious radicalization, poorly resourced or managed public school systems are more likely to create an enabling environment for violent extremism. One participant emphasized that some of the most successful school interventions are those that take risks, for example, by presenting multiple arguments and leaving it up to students to discuss and debate, or engaging them in anti-violence campaigns outside of school grounds.

Creating inclusive, well-designed policies

Participants agreed that approaches to countering violence extremism in education should be need-based and the development of curricula, policies, and procedures should be based on the interests of youths rather than the priorities of policymakers or practitioners. It was pointed out that including youth in the development of curriculum design may increase its effectiveness because it is based on beneficiary views, and not simply adults' perceptions of what youth want/need. Thus, policy support for student-led or student-designed curricula may not only increase the quality of students' education, but also create a sense of investment in their future that could help build resilience against violent extremism.

Because a main goal of CVE programming is to build community resilience against violent extremism, of which education plays a critical role, it would also be useful to include other relevant actors in the development of educational policies. These actors include

respected religious and community leaders, civil society organizations, businesses, and law enforcement officials. Governments and schools could partner with nongovernment organizations to implement some policies on the ground, especially those that focus on after-school programming and community engagement.

Key Highlights and Recommendations

Building on the fruitful discussions over the expert roundtable, four key points emerged regarding the relationship between education and CVE, and the implications for policy and practice going forward.

Focus on the fundamentals first

Just adding a CVE dimension on a weak base will not work. Teachers and staff need to be equipped to teach effectively. Schools need to be safe places—safe for students and safe for teachers. Before fundamentals such as safety and infrastructure (in some cases as basic as ensuring lavatories for girls in schools, for example) are addressed, it is difficult to contemplate taking risks or being innovative in trying creative CVE approaches.

Curriculum and activities must promote critical thinking

Participants broadly agreed on the importance of early education in mother tongue or an accessible language to allow students to speak up, think critically, challenge texts and assumptions, and debate critical issues. Also noted and deserving of attention is the need for sports, drama, theatre, and art to stretch imaginations, promote critical thinking and strategizing, build team spirit and collaboration, and develop cultural knowledge to challenge extremist narratives.

Educational institutions should focus on promoting and sustaining collaboration among students, families, and communities

What happens after school hours can be critical to sustaining the lessons taught in the classroom. Practitioners strongly urged educational programming that goes beyond the school day to reach and involve families and communities. In some cases, this might be achieved by developing after-hours programs in school buildings that are not being used after closing time. Moreover, such initiatives could actively encourage and support community service opportunities and intramural sports and inter-school leagues. One way to do that is create events where families can join—for example in sports, theatre, literacy classes. It was pointed out that simple “exposure” is not always sufficient to effectively promote tolerance and engagement, so programs that facilitate sustained collaboration and teamwork with inter-faith or community engagement as an attendant benefit should be prioritized.

International and regional partners can play a critical role in supporting the development of tailored and sustainable CVE and education programming

Assistance provided by national, regional, or international donors may be directed toward offering training and support for teachers, especially in supporting the promotion of logical, creative, and critical thinking. Additionally, such resources can support the provision of key materials that contribute to both educational and CVE aims, including supplies like library books (including translations into the vernacular), globes, newspaper or magazine subscriptions, arts materials, etc., which help students gain a deeper understanding of global issues and cultures.

Partners can also support the creation of programs that help to bring multiple groups together, particularly youth. Some suggestions for such programs were raised in the roundtable, including supporting local versions of Model UN programs, such as a “Model SAARC” in South Asia, “Model AU” in Africa, using established political platforms to help students learn about each other. These could help students in middle and secondary schools engage more broadly on international issues and be exposed to a variety of perspectives. Sports teams and leagues, drama troupes, youth newspapers or magazines, or web-journalism and blogs could be ways to bring together different groups for common aims.

At the national and international levels, donor states and partners can also support the development and dissemination of best practices drawing on experiences in different parts of the world that can help governments shape educational priorities and allocate resources. Hedayah would be well placed to convene such a process and compile best practices for GCTF member states and others to adapt to their needs at home and in third countries that are recipients of capacity-building support. Host or “recipient” countries and governments also have a critical role to play in directing CVE initiatives to help support, where possible, their own development and educational agendas. This is reflective of core development principles as well. This can help avoid the development of parallel systems and agendas, and ensure that donor support is helping to build local and national capacity to ensure that the changes can be sustained in the medium-to-long term.

Finally, the UN can play an important role in the field of education and countering violent extremism; more could be done to draw upon and maximize the UN’s experience and expertise and its global reach in this area. In 2006, the General Assembly unanimously adopted its Strategy as a blueprint for a coordinated, consistent, and comprehensive response to terrorism at the national, regional, and global levels. The Strategy calls for a holistic, inclusive approach to counterterrorism, which includes not just security-related preventative measures, but also gives priority attention to ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law, as well as addressing underlying conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism. According to the Strategy, these conditions include: poverty, prolonged unresolved conflicts, dehumanization of victims of terrorism, lack of rule of law and violations of human rights, ethnic, national and religious discrimination, political exclusion, socio-economic marginalization, and lack of good governance.

Ways Ahead

Following these roundtables, Hedayah and CGCC will continue to develop projects and programming to build on the valuable inputs and ideas. In December 2013 Hedayah will host a roundtable on the roles of families and communities in CVE. This roundtable will also build on a workshop hosted by CGCC which explored the roles of women in strengthening community resilience against violence and extremism in South Asia, and which sparked a discussion on the role of education, families, and communities in addressing the challenge.



Roundtable participants, September 2013.