

Going Local

Supporting Community-Based Initiatives to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism in South and Central Asia



BY RAFIA BHULAI

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

The Global Center on Cooperative Security, with support from the U.S. Department of State, undertook a two-year program to provide small grants funding to civil society organizations in South and Central Asia to develop contextually tailored and locally relevant responses to violent extremism. This report highlights the projects undertaken by the local implementers and captures key lessons and insights

gained from the program. It aims to serve as a resource for policymakers and practitioners as they look to support future programming on preventing and countering violent extremism in South and Central Asia.

The Global Center worked with the implementing partners below to develop their projects and supported them in the implementation.

Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI)

The BEI is a nonprofit, independent think tank that focuses on foreign policy and security, including traditional and nontraditional threats; governance, including government, corporate, and private sector; regional economic integration; and training and capacity building. The BEI offered inputs to governmental policies, including the National Counter-Terrorism Policy and Strategy for Bangladesh in 2011 and supported the drafting of the National Counter-Radicalization Policy for Bangladesh and Counter Narrative to Extremist Ideology. The BEI also convenes dialogues, workshops, seminars, and campaigns involving government officials, regional and international partners, media, civil society, and the private sector at all levels on common and collective interests, including prevention of radicalization and violent extremism. For more information, visit <http://bei-bd.org/>.

Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS)

BIPSS is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, and independent think tank that provides analysis of a broad spectrum of peace and security issues in South Asia and beyond. Areas for research and analysis include countering violent extremism (CVE), cybersecurity, security implications of climate change, maritime security, and strategic dialogue and outreach. BIPSS houses the Bangladesh Centre for Terrorism Research (BCTR), which focuses on research, analysis, training, and outreach activities on CVE issues. The BCTR organizes Track 2 forums with the United States, India, China, and Singapore, among others. BIPSS also aims to train a new generation of Bangladeshi scholars and analysts, for instance through internships and youth dialogues on key issues facing Bangladesh and the region. For more information, visit <http://www.bipss.org.bd/>.

Centre for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation (CPBR)

Established in 2002 in Sri Lanka, the core philosophy of the CPBR is interdependence, which it promotes by building, nurturing, sustaining, and transforming human relationships. This includes the ability and potential to build new relationships, design creative spaces to freely build these relationships, develop capacities to sustain relationships, and create physical and psychological spaces to deepen the quality of human relationships. The CPBR works to ensure that grassroots communities are actively engaged in the democratic process and are included in national-level decision-making. The main tools of CPBR interventions have been conflict transformation, peace-building, reconciliation, visual literacy (mainly photography), and sustainable living. The CPBR also facilitates personal transformation, capacity development, and confidence building. For more information, visit <https://www.peaceinsight.org/conflicts/sri-lanka/peacebuilding-organisations/cpbr/>.

Javononi Peshsaf

Javononi Peshsaf is a civil society organization in Tajikistan that aims to enhance the role of women and youth in the process of peace and security and the prevention of domestic violence and violent extremism. Its mission is to encourage and inspire young people and to involve youth and women in the development of a vibrant civil society in Tajikistan. Previous projects included the “Improving Social Value to Women’s Rights and Life” project, which aimed to prevent violence against children, young people, and women, and the “Prevention of Domestic Violence, Radicalism, and Extremism” project, which aimed to strengthen the role of civil society, in particular the role of youth and women. The latter project also identified the differences and commonalities of exposure to violent extremism and domestic violence among families. For more information, visit http://ef-ca.tj/javononi_peshsaf_eng.html.

Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN)

The MDN is a nonpartisan nongovernmental organization (NGO) that aims to promote human rights and the values and principles of democracy in the Maldives. MDN activities include awareness raising, monitoring, reporting, lobbying, and advocacy. Although based in the capital Male’, the MDN is active across the country, conducting workshops, trainings, monitoring, and advocacy activities in various atolls. The MDN works to support the realization of a democratic system of governance that upholds human rights and that aligns with the Constitution of the Maldives and the UN core conventions on human rights to which the Maldives is a signatory. The MDN campaigns for the rights of citizens and noncitizens residing in the Maldives and promotes democratic values and standards. For more information, visit <http://mdn.mv/>.

Nepal Peacebuilding Initiative (NPI)

The NPI is a nonprofit organization that focuses on research, analysis, and dialogue on security and development issues. Its goal is to enhance local input on security and development interventions and strengthen the capacity of societies to build durable peace. The NPI collaborates closely with governmental agencies, civil society organizations, and community members to enhance their peace-building capacity. It has worked in the sectors of governance, postconflict peace-building interventions, and more recently postdisaster relief and development. The NPI also collaborated on projects with the University of Denver, the Institute of Development Studies, the Chr. Michelsen Institute, the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, the Global Center, the Communicating With Disaster Affected Communities Network, and the German Institute of Global and Area Studies, as well as several governments. For more information, visit <http://nepalpeacebuilding.org/>.

Peace and Education Foundation (PEF)

The PEF focuses on building the capacity of civil society and empowering religious actors (e.g., madrasa teachers, imams, and interfaith leaders) to play a critical role in preventing the spread of intolerance and violence. Since 2009, through its capacity-building and community engagement programs, the PEF has engaged and trained more than 15,000 religious actors and other community leaders in Pakistan. PEF alumni initiate religious interventions within their communities to halt the spread of violent extremist narratives. They continue to develop various peace- and tolerance-building programs, facilitate educational enhancement initiatives, and establish a sustainable mechanism to protect embattled minority communities from extremist violence in the most vulnerable and conflict-affected areas of Pakistan. For more information, visit <http://www.peaceandeducationfoundation.org/>.

Seeking Modern Applications for Real Transformation (SMART)

SMART is an Indian NGO focusing on digital literacy and financial inclusion and mainstreaming those members of society who have been left out of the development process because of caste, religion, ideology, or geography. It works with women in predominantly Muslim areas of Assam, Kashmir, Haryana, and Jharkhand. SMART established Mothers Support Networks with the aim of empowering mothers to share their stories of fear, discrimination, and pain and equipping them with skills to change their situation. Using radio, SMART created “Mothers on Air” for mothers to share their stories and build their confidence and to help them become active stakeholders in the future of their children and contribute to an environment of peace and development. For more information, visit <http://www.smartngo.org/>.

Women and Peace Studies Organization (WPSO)

The WPSO works with local Afghan women to help build their capacities and mentor them to lead community-based peace-building initiatives and to prepare them to run in provincial and parliamentary elections, while providing leadership and community mobilization skills. It also works directly with the security sector ministries to include women in meaningful roles within the police and army. Together with the Afghan Ministry of Interior, the WPSO developed a five-year strategy for women’s recruitment, retention, capacity building, and protection within the police force. It is also co-chair of the Women, Peace and Security Working Group for the implementation of the National Action Plan on UN Security Council Resolution 1325. For more information, visit <http://wpsso-afg.org/>.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BEI	Bangladesh Enterprise Institute
BIPSS	Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies
CPBR	Centre for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation (Sri Lanka)
CVE	countering violent extremism
FTF	foreign terrorist fighter
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
MDN	Maldivian Democracy Network
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NPI	Nepal Peacebuilding Initiative
P/CVE	preventing and countering violent extremism
PEF	Peace and Education Foundation (Pakistan)
PTA	parent/teacher association
SMART	Seeking Modern Applications for Real Transformation (India)
SMC	school managing committee
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Sri Lanka)
UN	United Nations
U.S.	United States
VOI	Voice of Image (Sri Lanka)
WoW	Women on Wheels (Pakistan)
WPSO	Women and Peace Studies Organization (Afghanistan)

INTRODUCTION

Civil society organizations represent a bulwark against violent extremism. Their presence within and service of communities often position them as effective interlocutors to facilitate access and communication with law enforcement and government officials.¹ Within South and Central Asia, a region negatively impacted by violence and conflict for decades, a vibrant and independent civil society has been working to tackle many of the ongoing development, political, and socioeconomic challenges that often give rise to an environment conducive to violent extremism. Civil society's role in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) will become even more critical as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) continues to lose territory in Iraq and Syria, which may prompt its affiliates in the region to expand and other groups such as al-Qaeda to redouble efforts to consolidate power and control, leading to further regional instability.²

Similarly, P/CVE efforts initiated at the community level will need to be intensified to help reduce the appeal of violent extremist groups for individuals who may be inspired by their ideology. An estimated 580 individuals from South Asia and about 2,000 from Central Asia have traveled to join ISIL.³ About 1,000 fighters are estimated to be part of ISIL in the Khorasan Province in Afghanistan, which consists mainly of former Pakistani and Afghan Taliban members from Central Asia.⁴ On the other hand, groups such as ISIL

often leverage local and regional grievances to mobilize support and carry out attacks inside and outside the region without any direct contact with ISIL leadership. There are also growing concerns about these groups capitalizing on the ongoing crisis in Myanmar's Rakhine state, which has seen more than 600,000 Rohingya refugees crossing the border into Bangladesh since August 2017, to incite sympathizers into action and appeal to new recruits.⁵

Although external forces continue to shape violent radicalization across these diverse regions, many of the drivers of violence and violent extremism in South and Central Asia remain local in nature, underscoring the need for locally led P/CVE efforts. These drivers include inequality, marginalization and discrimination, un- and underemployment, weak rule of law and governance, human rights violations, political exclusion, and a lack of adequate resources and service delivery. In some cases, religious extremists, such as the Taliban, exploit these grievances and capitalize on a culture of political violence by questioning the legitimacy of secular governments and proposing a violent transformation of the state. Moreover, extremist groups often seek to reduce the space for pluralist discourse and engagement, threatening minority rights and civil liberties, as demonstrated by deadly attacks on liberal and secular voices in Bangladesh and the Maldives or the increase in violence and intimidation against minorities in India by Hindu nationalists.

1 Rafia Bhulai et al., "Strengthening Rule of Law Responses to Counter Violent Extremism: What Role for Civil Society in South Asia?" Global Center on Cooperative Security and The Institute for Inclusive Security, May 2015, http://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/May-2015_Strengthening-Rule-of-Law-Responses-to-Counter-Violent-Extremism3.pdf.

2 Daniel L. Byman, "What's Beyond the Defeat of ISIS?" Brookings Institute, 27 September 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/09/27/whats-beyond-the-defeat-of-isis/>.

3 The Soufan Group, "Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters Into Syria and Iraq," December 2015, http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf. See Caleb Odorfer, "High-Level Experts Meeting on Framing Development Solutions for the Prevention of Violent Extremism: Dushanbe 2016," UN Development Programme, n.d., p. 5, http://www.eurasia.undp.org/content/dam/rbec/docs/Dushanbe_Report_Final.pdf (hereinafter Dushanbe 2016 report).

4 Camilla Schick, Mujib Mashal, and Mark Scheffler, "The ISIS Threat: A Closer Look at the ISIS Threat in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, 15 April 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/world/asia/100000005044927/a-closer-look-at-the-isis-threat-in-afghanistan.html?rref=collection%2Fsectioncollection%2Fasia>.

5 Francis Chan, "ISIS, Al-Qaeda Drawn to Crisis in Rakhine State," *Straits Times*, 20 September 2017, <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/isis-al-qaeda-drawn-to-crisis-in-rakhine-state>.

Additionally, countries such as Kazakhstan face an increasing threat from homegrown violent extremists, as illustrated by attacks in Aktobe and Almaty.⁶ As in other regions, social injustice is often cited as a strong motivation for individuals from Central Asia to become involved with violent extremist groups, especially when such injustices are “couched in terminology invoking religion, standing against the West and Russia, family ties, political marginalization, repression of national religious leaders, or the greed and corruption of the government.”⁷ Similarly, heavy-handed security and counterterrorism responses exacerbate distrust between citizens and the state, deepening grievances relating to the securitization of the state-society relationship and fostering an enabling environment for terrorism and violent extremism.

The complexity of drivers of violent extremism highlights not only the need for equally multifaceted

and community-based P/CVE efforts, but also for a multi-stakeholder approach that includes governments, civil society, and international organizations working collaboratively toward more peaceful and resilient societies.

To help advance such an approach, the Global Center on Cooperative Security, with support from the U.S. Department of State, undertook a two-year program to support civil society organizations in South and Central Asia in the development of contextually tailored and locally relevant responses to violent extremism. This report highlights the initiatives undertaken by these organizations and captures the key lessons, good practices, and insights gained throughout the program. It concludes with key recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, and donors to consider as they look to initiate or increase support for P/CVE initiatives in South and Central Asia.

6 Reid Standish, “Our Future Will Be Violent Extremism,” *Foreign Policy*, 1 August 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/01/central-asia-kazakhstan-eurasia-terrorism-extremism-isis-al-qaeda/>.

7 Dushanbe 2016 report, p. 8.

ADVANCING THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA

Civil society organizations and other local actors are best attuned to the needs and challenges of their community and can develop and implement appropriate initiatives to help address these issues.⁸ The important role of civil society organizations and other nongovernmental actors in developing and implementing comprehensive responses to terrorism and violent extremism is increasingly recognized by national, regional, and multilateral actors. UN Secretary-General António Guterres asserted that “an active, inclusive, vibrant and free civil society is also a critical cornerstone of a comprehensive response” to the threat of violent extremism.⁹ Furthermore, in its 2016 review of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, the General Assembly encouraged member states to “enhance engagement with civil society ... and to support its role in the implementation of the Strategy.”¹⁰ The Global Counterterrorism Forum, an informal, multilateral counterterrorism platform comprising 30 members, including India and Pakistan, identified the need to develop multidimensional responses that balance preventive and reactive actions and emphasize engagement with civil society actors to address the wide spectrum of threats posed by sympathizers, supporters, and active participants of violent extremism and terrorism.¹¹

As a result of this increased recognition, P/CVE efforts are increasingly being devolved to the local level. Civil

society organizations across South and Central Asia, many of which focus on development, conflict prevention, peace-building, and human rights, have leveraged their experience in these areas to develop innovative P/CVE programs targeting a broad spectrum of issues confronting their communities. These initiatives include producing educational entertainment that challenges extremist narratives, improving relationships between communities and local government, and promoting research and understanding to better understand local factors contributing to the spread of violent radicalization. A number of organizations also aim to advance the inclusion and participation of women in prevention efforts, for example, by working with mothers to help them safeguard their families against violent extremism or by promoting female education to enhance critical thinking skills and women’s employment opportunities.¹²

Additionally, civil society organizations in the region are working to mitigate the impact of violent radicalization on their communities by rehabilitating and reintegrating violent extremist offenders, returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), and others affected by violent extremism. For example, they facilitate platforms for interaction among community and religious leaders, prison officers, teachers, parents, and others on topics related to radicalization to violent extremism and, in some cases, work directly with recipients in an attempt

8 Eric Rosand, “Communities First: A Blueprint for Organizing and Sustaining a Global Movement Against Violent Extremism,” The Prevention Project, December 2016, http://www.organizingagainstve.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Communities_First_December_2016.pdf.

9 “Applauding Central Asia Plan as Show of Collective Action, Secretary-General Calls for Enhancing ‘Strong,’ ‘Smart’ Policies to Prevent Violent Extremism,” UN Department of Public Information, SG/SM/18569-PA/20, 13 June 2017, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sgsm18569.doc.htm>.

10 UN General Assembly, *The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review*, A/RES/70/291, 19 July 2016, para. 10.

11 Global Counterterrorism Forum, “Ankara Memorandum on Good Practices for a Multi-Sectoral Approach to Countering Violent Extremism,” n.d., https://www.theGCTF.org/documents/10162/72352/13Sep19_Ankara+Memorandum.pdf; Council of the European Union, “European Union Counter-Terrorism Strategy,” 14469/4/05 REV 4, 30 November 2005.

12 Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Rafia Barakat, “Strengthening Community Resilience Against Violent Extremism: The Roles of Women in South Asia,” CGCC Policy Brief, November 2013, http://globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/13Nov27_Women-and-CVE-in-South-Asia_Policy-Brief_Final.pdf.

to reduce their risk of violent activity and reintegrate them into society.¹³ Several build on knowledge of and experience with postconflict reconciliation efforts, such as Sri Lankan nongovernmental actors working to rehabilitate and reintegrate former combatants of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) through psychosocial and spiritual counseling, peer networking, and vocational training.¹⁴

To build on these efforts and further promote civil society engagement in P/CVE in South and Central Asia, the Global Center undertook a two-year program funded by the U.S. State Department to support civil society organizations in developing local initiatives through the provision of small grants awards. This program was informed by extensive consultations between the Global Center and regional stakeholders, including civil society actors, experts, and practitioners.¹⁵ Through these consultations, the Global Center helped to raise awareness and foster a deeper understanding among these actors about regional drivers of violent extremism. These engagements provided a valuable opportunity for local actors to identify gaps and concrete initiatives and to reflect on good practices and lessons learned to enhance the capacity of civil society to address the threat of violent extremism while helping to build a community of practice in this area. As a result, the small grants program was designed to achieve several objectives.

- Strengthen the capacity of civil society organizations in South and Central Asia to undertake P/CVE programming through the provision of small grants awards.
- Increase understanding and awareness of P/CVE programming by developing a community of practice on P/CVE in South and Central Asia.
- Fill knowledge and programming gaps by capturing experiences, key lessons, and good practices from the small grants process to help inform further P/CVE engagement in the region.

In September 2015, the Global Center called for proposals for local P/CVE initiatives in South and Central Asia. Based on the needs and contextual analyses conducted by the Global Center through its various engagements in the region, priority areas were identified for eligible applicants to propose project concepts for (1) research, (2) community and multi-stakeholder engagement, and (3) counternarratives. Through a rigorous selection process, nine civil society organizations out of 25 applicants were awarded small grants funding: eight in South Asian countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) and one in Central Asia (Tajikistan). A total of \$160,000 was made available for the small grants funding (including \$12,000 for follow-up activities), with the individual projects ranging from \$10,000 to \$20,000.

13 For an example of such a program in Pakistan, see Feriha N. Peracha, Rafia R. Khan, and Sara Savage, "Sabaoon: Educational Methods Successfully Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism," in *Expanding Research on Countering Violent Extremism*, ed. Sara Zeiger, 2016, pp. 85–104, <http://www.hedayahcenter.org/Admin/Content/File-410201685227.pdf>.

14 Malkanthi Hettiarachchi, "Sri Lanka's Rehabilitation Program: A New Frontier in Counter Terrorism and Counter Insurgency," *Prism* 4, no. 2 (2013): 105–122.

15 For an in-depth look at the Global Center's engagement with civil society, experts, and practitioners in South and Central Asia, see Rafia Bhulai and Naureen Chowdhury Fink, "Strengthening Regional Cooperation to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism in South Asia: What Role for Civil Society?" Global Center, December 2016, http://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/2016-12_Bhulai-Fink-South-Asia-CSE-Process.pdf; "Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in South and Central Asia: The Role of Civil Society," Global Center, n.d., <http://www.globalcenter.org/events/preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism-in-south-and-central-asia-the-role-of-civil-society/>.

EXAMINING LOCAL PERCEPTIONS OF DRIVERS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The last decade has produced a wealth of research and information on radicalization and violent extremism. Yet, many South and Central Asian civil society representatives reported that these studies are often not specific to community-level dynamics and identified the need for localized research and data collection to help ensure that interventions are evidence based and impact is monitored granularly. Civil society representatives noted that, without the ability to conduct or access research, it is difficult to understand gaps and priorities that help develop locally relevant and contextually sensitive initiatives. It is critical to ensure that research is genuinely independent and not conducted in a way that simply confirms donor or governmental biases.

Through the small grants process, the Global Center supported three research projects in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan that focused primarily on enhancing the knowledge base on local drivers and perceptions of violent extremism.

Perspectives on the Root Causes, Drivers, and Dynamics of Radicalization to Violent Extremism in Bangladesh

In recent years, Bangladesh has witnessed increasingly frequent terrorist attacks and assaults on minorities, bloggers, gay rights activists, and university teachers.¹⁶ Although limited, most of the home-grown violent extremist outfits received ideological and tactical support from transnational terrorism networks such as ISIL and al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent.¹⁷ This increasing violence and apparent support for local and

international violent extremist groups is a growing source of concern in Bangladesh, but there remains little objective research available on the local drivers and dynamics of violent radicalization.¹⁸

As part of the small grants program, the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS) undertook a research study to investigate perspectives on local drivers and dynamics of radicalization and to identify key entry points for ISIL recruitment in Bangladesh. BIPSS surveyed about 200 students of ages 15 to 30 years in Dhaka on their perceptions of violent extremism. Because young people are consistently and deliberately targeted by terrorist and violent extremist groups for recruitment and given the significant Bangladeshi youth bulge, BIPSS believed it was important to have a better understanding of how young people perceive these groups so as to develop more effective policies, especially those targeting youth. The study was 67 percent male and 33 percent female and 91 percent Muslim, 8 percent Hindu, and 1 percent Buddhist. Fifty-one percent of the respondents attended private universities, 32 percent attended public colleges, and 17 percent attended government and private colleges.

The study found that the majority were familiar with the concept of militancy, while 30 percent were familiar with terrorism and only 2 percent with extremism. Television and newspapers represented the main sources of respondent knowledge about these terms. When asked about the main facilitators of radicalization in Bangladesh, 39 percent believed it was due to external/foreign sources, followed by local political parties (33 percent) and religious groups (22 percent). Among

16 For example, in July 2016, a bakery near the diplomatic zone was attacked by ISIL-backed perpetrators. Twenty people were killed, including, nine Italians, seven Japanese, six Bangladeshis, one Indian, and one U.S. citizen after a 12-hour hostage situation. "Bangladesh Siege: Twenty Killed at Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka," BBC News, 2 July 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-36692613>.

17 Shahab Enam Khan, "Bangladesh: The Changing Dynamics of Violent Extremism and the Response of the State," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 28, no. 1 (2017): 191–217.

18 For a recent study, see C. Christine Fair and Wahid Abdallah, "Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: Public Awareness and Attitudes," *RESOLVE Network Research Brief*, no. 4 (September 2017), http://www.resolve.net.org/system/files/2017-09/RSVE_04BangladeshBrief_MilitantSupport2017.pdf.

the primary reasons respondents cited for radicalization among young people are a sense of inequality and marginalization, but only 14 percent believed that young people are tempted by power and money while 34 percent believed that recruiters mislead youths with false promises of paradise in the afterlife. Relatedly, a majority felt that youths are easily persuaded and influenced by others, such as role models, while 12 percent believed that youths are inherently more violent. A majority also believed that the internet helps to facilitate radicalization, including through social media and blogs. These results seem to confirm other research findings that sociopolitical grievances are a major push factor in Bangladesh but it is the appeal to religious sensibilities that often pulls youths toward violent extremism.

In addition to the survey, six focus group discussions with about 10 participants each and 10 key informant interviews were conducted with representatives from different groups, including law enforcement agencies, educational institutions, guardians and family, and civil society organizations. These discussions and interviews were intended to solicit participant perspectives about terrorism and violent extremism in Bangladesh and their insights on preventing or countering the threat. Among the interviewees were a mother of a radicalized militant and senior law enforcement officials directly involved in counterterrorism efforts in Bangladesh. The discussions and interviews produced key recommendations for various stakeholders to consider in P/CVE in Bangladesh.

- Ensure greater awareness-raising about the harmful impact of radicalization in formal and informal educational institutions, for example, through the creation of an ethics course that will allow for inclusive dialogue on these issues.
- Support the role of families in preventing radicalization, for example, through greater awareness-

raising of their role and remedial actions they can take.

- Provide a platform for sustained discussions between religious leaders and communities to help build religious knowledge and clarify questions related to religion and violent extremism.
- Facilitate training and professional development opportunities for journalists, editors, other media practitioners, and credible messengers so that they are better equipped to contribute to more balanced and informed coverage of national emergencies and events such as terrorist attacks.

Exploring the Role of Religious Journals in Violent Extremism in Pakistan

Pakistan, like a number of other South Asian countries, is confronted with religiously inspired violence, often in the form of sectarianism and communalism. Certain religious journals and other media, for instance, for a long time have been a key factor in driving violent extremist views of individuals, groups, and organizations by encouraging and even inciting violence through the distortion of facts and misrepresentation of religious scripture. Although many madrassas and religious groups have no direct link to militant or radical groups, they often promote similarly prejudiced and intolerant views in their religious magazines and journals. Limiting and altogether eliminating the publication and circulation of such literature remain a challenge for law enforcement agencies and are key objectives of Pakistan's national action plan to counter terrorism, which was established in January 2015.¹⁹

The Peace and Education Foundation (PEF), in line with this national endeavor, undertook a study to explore the dynamics of radicalization and the extent to which religious media, particularly religious journals and magazines, are a key element in the process of radicalization to violent extremism. The study was limited

19 Since the establishment of the national action plan, Pakistani law enforcement agencies have registered more than 1,200 cases of hate speech and material and arrested close to 2,500 individuals as part of their campaign against hate speech and extremist literature. A large quantity of hate literature was confiscated, and 70 shops that were helping to disseminate the material were closed down. See Muhammad Bilal, "Progress on NAP: 1,865 Terrorists Killed, Over 5,000 Arrested," *Dawn*, 10 March 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1319626>.

to religious magazines published and distributed in Pakistan and did not include religious magazines that represent banned militant groups or those published and distributed secretly. The PEF monitored and analyzed 17 prominent magazines (72 editions in total) related to seminaries or different sects from the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, and Karachi regions in Pakistan: Deobandi, Bareilvi, Shia, Salafi, Tanzeem-e-Islami, and Jamat-e-Islami. The PEF identified seven major categories of biases that were common in all journals: overt sectarian prejudices; glorification of jihadists; anti-Western sentiments; biases against liberalism, secularism, and democracy; biases against modern education; widespread support for blasphemy laws; and biases against women's empowerment.

The most common trend found was criticism of the practices and beliefs of other sects implicitly and explicitly. Adding to sectarian biases is the promotion of propaganda that glorifies one's own ideology, leading to an endless race for sectarian supremacy. Another common trend is the glorification of jihad, including advocating jihadi activities within Pakistan and in places such as Afghanistan, Kashmir, and Palestine. Many publications also blame Western countries for promoting immoral social values and anti-Islamic rhetoric. They often claim that liberalism, secularism, and democracy are Western values that seek to undermine Islam and are the cause of many contemporary problems faced by Muslim societies around the world. Likewise, non-religious educational topics such as the social sciences are blamed for spreading infidelity and pushing people away from religion. The publications often call on the government to take policy measures to establish an Islamic educational system, which they claim is part of the government's moral, religious, and constitutional responsibility. Many of the religious magazines included articles in support of Pakistan's controversial blasphemy law.

The reviewed journals also targeted women's rights and empowerment, specifically denouncing the passage of legislation in the Punjab Assembly titled "Protection of Women Against Violence" and a Women on Wheels (WoW) rally conducted in Lahore to help women reclaim public spaces and stop harassment. The bill,

which included the creation of women's shelters and district-level panels to investigate reports of abuse, was later declared null and void due to pressure from religious leaders. The bill was criticized by male and female contributors to the religious journals for violating Islamic practices and protecting and legalizing sin. Likewise, the WoW rally was said to be devoid of morals, and writers emphasized that women should focus on fulfilling their religious and social responsibilities. Writers often accuse representatives from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working on women's rights issues of being "agents" working on foreign agendas and promoting false propaganda against Islamic social values.

According to the PEF, these biases or beliefs communicated in religious magazines nurture an environment of hatred and intolerance in which extremist ideologies often thrive. It concluded that some of these religious magazines intentionally or unintentionally sympathize with, justify, or at times even support violent extremist ideologies and contribute to an enabling environment for extremist groups to interact with lower-level sympathizers. As a result, the PEF recommends that the government formulate a clear policy in relation to publications that propagate violent hate speech against any sect, group, or other nonreligious perspective while upholding the country's constitutional rights of freedom of speech and expression and freedom of religion. There is also an urgent need to develop alternative discourses to counter violent extremist narratives. Key actions that could be taken by the government include

- constituting a permanent body at the provincial level with the authority to ban the sale and distribution of publications that promote hate and violence in accordance with international and national laws,
- developing a clear media policy or code of ethics for religious publications that treats violations of the laws related to hate speech by the mainstream and religious media equally and appropriately, and
- engaging with editors and writers of religious journals and facilitating media training for them on moral and ethical values of journalism such as truth, accuracy, fairness, and impartiality.

Examining Drivers of Violent Extremism in Kunduz

Kunduz, Afghanistan, has been the site of pitched battles between Taliban and Afghan government security forces. In a 2015 battle, about 6,000 families were displaced; and large parts of the city destroyed, buildings were burned to the ground, and NGO and governmental offices and local shops were looted and vandalized. During this time, the Women and Peace Studies Organization (WPSO) observed numerous attacks by the Taliban on women's rights and human rights organizations and projects. Despite political and security improvements, the Taliban and other militant groups took control of Kunduz in October 2016 for the second time in two years.

With their small grants award, the WPSO targeted Kunduz for a participatory action research project to gain a better understanding of concerns and perceptions of community members regarding the threat of violent extremism in their locales.²⁰ More than 200 semistructured interviews were conducted with influential community leaders, government officials, Islamic scholars, university professors, and women's rights activists. Additionally, the WPSO hosted 20 focus group discussions and two town hall-type community dialogues in which more than 120 women and men participated.

During the discussions, women revealed that they felt helpless in their own families and unable to impact the attitudes and behaviors of their husbands and sons. As a result, the community dialogues and focus group discussions focused on ways to harness women's agency to influence or dissuade individuals, particularly male relatives, from supporting the Taliban and engaging in violent activities. For example, a doctor from Badakhshan recalled that "when wounded insurgents' families came to my clinic for medication, I always try to advocate and appeal to them to request their sons, fathers, and husbands to stop the insurgency and join the peace process." Another woman stated that "when

my son wanted to join [the] Taliban, I told him that I will never forgive the milk that I have given to you. I convinced him to join [the Afghan National Army], but I am so worried that I will lose him one day."

Additionally, many women complained about the Afghan government's disproportionate focus on hard security responses to the Taliban insurgency, often without a nuanced understanding of the drivers or factors that push individuals toward these groups, such as corruption, lack of service delivery, injustice, and violence, particularly by armed forces. The growing number of unregistered madrassas also led to concerns, and the women warned that if left unchecked, they can provide an enabling environment for extremist religious clerics to promote and incite violence. The WPSO also found a general lack of political will and consensus among community leaders and local government officials in Kunduz in terms of recognizing and addressing the existence of violent extremist groups.

Based on this participatory research project, the WPSO recommended that Afghan national and local authorities undertake several steps to halt the spread of violent extremism in Kunduz and other areas.

- They should facilitate the creation of local and national networks or platforms that promote collaboration and unity among religious groups, community members, and civil society organizations, academia, and others. For example, the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs, Education and the Academy of Sciences could support this network by making available important information such as interpretations of religious texts.
- They should develop an appropriate system to identify, register, and then monitor currently nonregistered madrassas and mosques, including a review of the level of knowledge, teaching materials, teaching methods, and sources of funding of these madrassas.

20 WPSO, "A Participatory Action Research on Causes and Concerns Related to Growing Violent Extremism in Kunduz Province," n.d., <http://wpsa-afg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/CVE-Briefing-Paper.pdf>.

- They should improve governmental accountability and responsiveness to public needs, for instance, through a series of measurable and immediate steps toward reform in different local governance bodies,

especially security and justice systems. Civil society could play an important role in helping to build the trust among communities, law enforcement officials, and local government.

ENGAGING DIFFERENT GROUPS AND STAKEHOLDERS IN EFFORTS TO PREVENT VIOLENCE

Throughout the program, civil society actors consistently emphasized the importance of partnerships among multiple stakeholders, especially in light of the multidimensional threat posed by violent extremism to development, stability, peace, and security. Mutual trust and understanding are key elements to sustaining multi-stakeholder platforms. Local implementers initiated several small grants projects in order to engage a variety of actors in strengthening resilience against violent extremism.

Training Female Teachers in Bangladesh

A closer understanding of the roles that women play in relation to violence and conflict is critical to the development of effective, tailored strategies to strengthen resilience against violence and extremism and support victims and survivors of terrorist attacks. Women can be powerful preventers and have participated in innovative efforts to inform, shape, and implement policies and programs to reduce the appeal of violence and extremism and mitigate the effects of terrorism on communities.²¹ Recognizing the important role of women in P/CVE and to promote a whole-of-society approach, the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) developed a series of trainings and capacity-building activities for secondary school female teachers in Bangladesh. The BEI surmised that empowering female teachers to spread values of pluralism, diversity, tolerance, and human rights to students and their families can have a positive effect in strengthening community resilience against violent extremism.

The project engaged 42 female teachers and 210 students and 210 of their family members. Twenty-two female teachers from Godagari Upazilla of Rajshahi district, organized in seven groups, engaged with 110 students and their families, while 20 female teachers from

Shibganj Upazilla of Chapai Nawabganj, organized in six groups, engaged with 100 students and their families. These areas were chosen because they were badly affected by recent rounds of violence in Bangladesh. All of the teachers taught at local girls' schools; boys' schools or coeducational institutions did not have female teachers or were unable to spare them for the project activities. During the inception phase and to ensure the sustainability and success of the project, the BEI worked with two local coordinators, one in each district, to provide support and help in the monitoring and evaluation of activities.

Two capacity-building workshops were organized in the two districts during the summer vacation so as to retain full attention from the teachers and to avoid other potential disruptions. The teachers were trained on how to effectively guide students and their families in discussions focused on tolerance and diversity, interfaith communication, identification of factors and potential warning signs of radicalization leading to violent extremism, and outreach to at-risk youth. Based on pre- and postassessment surveys, the BEI found that the capacity-building workshops helped to empower the female teachers to engage with families and students more effectively as they gained a better understanding of issues related to radicalization and violent extremism. The teachers also reported having a better understanding of the role of social institutions, such as family and educational institutions, in sensitizing, motivating, and guiding students away from violent extremism.

After the workshops, two rounds of teacher-family-student dialogues were organized to discuss the topics on which the teachers were trained during the workshops. Each trained teacher engaged with five families in the first round of thematic dialogue and then with the five students and their families in a second round. The BEI

21. Fink and Barakat, "Strengthening Community Resilience Against Violence and Extremism."

provided an instructional module with specific reporting guidelines and a set of questionnaire templates to all teachers beforehand. The teachers were instructed to note their findings and experiences during their interactions with students and their families.

In evaluating the project, the BEI found that although almost all (99 percent) of the engaged families tried to talk to their children about social and political issues, including radicalization to violent extremism, only about 35 percent were themselves aware of the terrorist attacks in Bangladesh. Many of the family members identified other major problems as threats to their families and society, such as drug trafficking and abuse, unemployment and poverty, and child marriage. Nevertheless, a majority of the family members acknowledged the importance of regular communication with teachers to stay abreast of their children's performance and behavior in school. Parents and teachers also expressed their need for technology training to give them a better understanding of social media and how they can be used as a platform both for radicalization and prevention.

Through the project, the BEI concluded that it is key to engage school managing committees (SMCs) given that they comprise multiple stakeholders from all levels of society, such as heads of local administrations, principals, teachers, guardians, and members of locally elected bodies. SMCs manage many of the school's administrative functions, raise funds, and create endowments. As a result, selected members of SMCs and parent-teacher associations (PTAs) of the project's targeted educational institutions received one-day trainings on the role of social and educational institutions in building and promoting social harmony and countering violent extremist narratives through social media and the role of advocacy and participatory action to prevent violent extremism. In evaluating the outcomes of the workshop, the BEI found that trained SMC and PTA members had a better understanding of the process of radicalization and violent extremism and also of the



Teachers participate in a BEI workshop. (Bangladesh Enterprise Institute)

role that social and educational institutions play in prevention efforts. They indicated their willingness to launch an advocacy campaign and build stronger community networks and strengthen community resilience against the threat of violent extremism.

Mobilizing Youth Groups in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka recently emerged from a long and brutal armed conflict between the government and the LTTE, which had fought to establish a separate state in the country's north and east. Since the end of the war in 2009, governmental and nongovernmental actors in Sri Lanka have sought to promote restorative justice and the rehabilitation and reintegration of former LTTE members and collaborators and promoted broader peace and reconciliation efforts.²² Building on these efforts, the Centre for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation (CPBR) undertook a youth-focused initiative to promote nonviolent strategies for conflict transformation at the individual and community levels, funded through this small grants program.

Through the project, the CPBR mobilized eight youth groups across four districts in Sri Lanka (Jaffna, Polonnaruwa, Batticola, and Nuwaraeliya). The youths were selected from communities with diverse religious

22 For example, rehabilitation centers were developed to provide interschool harmony projects aimed at increasing cultural learning and critical thinking skills. Art and cultural shows, such as fusion dancing and dramas, were used to highlight the impact of violent extremism on all aspects of society. Hettiarachchi, "Sri Lanka's Rehabilitation Program."



*Participants discuss at an “exhibition for dialogue.”
(Centre for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation)*

affiliations (Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam) and ethnic representations (Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim). Having a diversity of young people represented in the groups was important for building new relationship bridges and increasing levels of trust and communication among them. Each youth group was represented by five members; together, these 40 young community organizers were tasked with designing and implementing youth-led initiatives that promote peace and nonviolence. In collaboration with another CPBR initiative called Voice of Image (VOI), which engages youth in community peace-building initiatives through creative photography, the youth groups organized “exhibitions for dialogue” to raise awareness about conflict-related issues afflicting their communities. These exhibitions provided an opportunity for community members, governmental representatives, religious leaders, and other relevant stakeholders to understand and discuss issues that the youth groups determined as important to their communities, such as poverty, war, sexual violence, and environmental disasters.

One such exhibition was held in Jaffna district, where more than 100 community members attended and viewed more than 300 photographs demonstrating the aftereffects of the conflict with the LTTE,

poverty-related issues, sexual violence against women and children, and environmental issues. After the exhibition, a dialogue session to further discuss these issues was attended by 55 community members, eight governmental representatives, five religious leaders, and 14 VOI members. Similar exhibitions were held in the three other districts targeted for this project.

After gaining first-hand experience in mobilizing their communities to action, about 20 of the youths participated in a workshop convened by the CPBR on conflict transformation and reconciliation through facilitative leadership. In addition to the training, the youths shared their experiences and ideas for follow-up actions, including the organization of youth camps, volunteer mentoring projects, and a mobile phone photography group. Following the workshop, a closed Facebook group was created comprising all the youths and resource persons from the CPBR to provide continuous, real-time support to the youths and to enhance the sharing of ideas and experiences.

This pilot project proved to be sustainable as the youths also continued to be engaged in their communities and utilized their newly acquired skills. For example, 12 of the youth mobilizers participated in the international conference “Art for Reconciliation” and had the opportunity to interact with a diverse group of people, including religious leaders, academics, diplomats, social activists, civil society representatives, governmental representatives, politicians, and other students. The group from Hatton district also conducted a seminar on community empowerment for youths, which they were able to organize with funds raised from community members, the Lions Club, police, and local politicians.

Improving Youth and Police Relationship in Nepal

Although Nepal’s decade-long Maoist insurgency came to an end in 2006, the country continues to grapple with low-level political violence and is witnessing a rise in violence and the presence of armed groups in the Tarai region.²³ The government’s response has been

23 Max Bearak, “Report on Nepal Protests Details Grisly Violence,” *New York Times*, 16 October 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/17/world/asia/report-on-nepal-protests-details-grisly-violence.html?mcubz=0&r=0>.

primarily security-centric with limited efforts to rebuild trust and confidence, particularly among marginalized ethnic groups. With support from the small grants program, the Nepal Peacebuilding Initiative (NPI) undertook a project aimed at facilitating regular engagements between Nepali police and young people (18 to 25 years old) in the Kailali district of Tarai. A series of dialogue sessions between the police and youth and community activities were organized to help establish more meaningful and productive lines of communication between the two groups and help reduce the risk of young people engaging in violent extremist activities.

During the discussions, youths shared their grievances, including cases of discrimination and ill treatment by the police. The law enforcement officials, represented by the superintendent of police, the chief district officer, and local police officers, admitted that their limited capacity and resources prevented them from adequately addressing citizens' concerns. The high-ranking officers also made their mobile numbers available to the youth so that they can be contacted directly. Some participants noted, however, that many in the area are still fearful of lodging reports against the police and requested the development of an anonymous reporting system. In surveying the outcome of the discussions, many of the youth participants expressed more positive attitudes toward the police and felt empowered to interact with the police regardless of their ranks.

Additionally, the NPI organized a number of community activities, including two football matches and a blood drive. The first football match took place between and among the Nepali police and young people from Tikapur district, where eight police officers were killed by demonstrators who were protesting against the newly promulgated constitution. After the game, the NPI provided footballs and jerseys to the local youth clubs. A second match, organized at the request of the Central Investigation Bureau of the Nepali police, was held in Saptari district, where five people were killed by the police during similar demonstrations. Other participants in the football matches included journalists, business owners, human right activists, and political leaders. Afterward, a dialogue session was organized during which a high-ranking police



Police and youth speak at dialogue session. (Nepal Peacebuilding Initiative)

official from Kathmandu, the chief district officer, and district police officers answered questions from the participants.

Given the success of these dialogue sessions, the NPI further organized discussions among Nepali police, human rights activists, and journalists, as well as between former Maoist child soldiers and youths from ethnically marginalized groups. Interactions among the Nepali police, human right activists, and journalists were thorny as the police were accused of discrimination, corruption, disregard for due process, and torture. Nevertheless, the NPI tried to guide the discussion to find helpful ways in which the groups can work better with each other. In another facilitated dialogue session, an ex-child soldier spoke with youths about his experience in a Maoist armed group and life as a child soldier. He encouraged the youths to reach out to him for guidance or to better understand armed violence and its repercussions for young people. The NPI hoped that, through these facilitated dialogues, the appeal of violence for young people will be reduced and they are better informed of alternatives, for example, education, training, mentoring, and employment opportunities.

Raising Awareness of Violent Extremism and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Tajikistan

Although Tajikistan has been judged to be of relatively low risk for violent extremism, a number of Islamist terrorist organizations are active in the country,



Students receive information on violent extremism at a high school. (Javononi Peshsaf)

including the al-Qaida–allied Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and there is growing concern about the relatively high proportion of ISIL recruits from the country. The government has responded aggressively by opening criminal proceedings against more than 160 Tajiks alleged to have fought with ISIL.²⁴ The government also imposed a number of controversial measures to restrict the influence and display of religion in public life, including banning long beards, headscarves, madrassas, and Arabic-sounding names.²⁵ In spite of, or in some cases, because of these restrictions, more than 2,000 Tajiks are reported to have joined ISIL, including a senior police commander, who has threatened to return to Tajikistan to establish sharia law.²⁶

Responding to this worrying trend, the NGO Javononi Peshsaf, with support from the small grants program, undertook a project to raise awareness about violent extremism and P/CVE among multiple stakeholders in the city of Panjakent, including police officers, women, religious leaders, teachers, and students. Javononi Peshsaf recognized that violent extremism is a complex phenomenon and any response needed to be comprehensive and multidimensional. In initiating the project, Javononi Peshsaf met with municipal officials to inform them of the project goals and objectives and signed a

memorandum of cooperation with the municipality to carry out project activities.

The project involved a series of informational campaigns that were conducted in high schools across seven villages, in which more than 300 students and 25 teachers participated. Many students in the country graduate without any prospects of employment and migrate, especially to Russia, for the promise of well-paying jobs. In some cases, these promises go unfulfilled, and the disillusioned young men become vulnerable to ISIL recruitment. It was hoped that informing students who are nearing graduation of the dangers and impact of terrorism and violent extremism, as well as the judicial consequences, would help to prevent them from getting involved in such activities. Additionally, seven P/CVE trainings were conducted for more than 170 participants, including municipal officials, religious leaders, governmental representatives, and law enforcement agents.

Both the informational campaigns and trainings included discussions on the concept and meaning of radicalization and violent extremism, as well as the drivers and indicators of violent extremism, the role of family in preventing violent extremism, and international P/CVE approaches. Information was also provided on Tajikistani law on terrorism and violent extremism, as well as the “National Strategy on Countering Extremism and Terrorism for 2016–2020,” which was adopted in 2016. Informational brochures on violent extremism and P/CVE were produced and shared with the participants. Meetings were also facilitated among women leaders, activists, and religious leaders with the head of the national Committee on Women and Family Affairs to discuss issues of radicalism and domestic violence against women, which is a serious problem in Tajikistan and for which questions have been raised about the possible linkages between them. At the request of some female participants, legal assistance was provided after the meeting, such as help with applying for national passports and advice on court proceedings related to domestic abuse.

24 Bureau of Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2016,” July 2017, p. 268, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/272488.pdf>.

25 “Tajikistan’s Crackdown on Observant Muslims Intensifies,” *Economist*, 21 September 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/asia/21729451-beards-veils-madrassas-and-arabic-sounding-names-are-all-banned-tajikistans-crackdown-observant>.

26 Ibid.

DEVELOPING ALTERNATIVE MESSAGES AND COUNTERNARRATIVES

Much of the fight against terrorism is a battle for ideas, with violent extremist narratives tapping into certain grievances to mobilize individuals to join their cause. Civil society representatives often underscore that for countermessaging to be effective and resonate with key audiences, it should be emotive, engaging, and locally driven. It is also important to develop alternative narratives to those of violent extremist groups, especially messages that can offer powerful incentives for positive action and not just argue point for point with extremists. In these efforts, the message, medium, and messenger are all crucial elements; how, with whom, and when interventions are conducted are as much a part of the message as the content itself. The credibility of interlocutors is key, and supporting and promoting these voices is important. The following examples of locally driven messaging campaigns were developed as part of the small grants process.

Empowering Mothers in India and Pakistan Through Media

ISIL has effectively used online and offline media to propagate its ideology to impressionable youth across the world. Its rousing slogans, misguided interpretation of religion and current affairs, and aggressive articulation of its worldview seek to influence those who feel as though they exist on the margins of societies. Recognizing the need to challenge and delegitimize extremist voices, the organization Seeking Modern Applications for Real Transformation (SMART) utilized its “Mothers on Air” platform to broadcast stories of mothers from India and Pakistan who have been affected by conflict-related violence.

In undertaking this pilot project, SMART partnered with Uks, a media-focused research center in Pakistan, to identify stories and experiences of mothers who have

been impacted by acts of violent extremism in their immediate family or neighborhood. In most cases, their sons had traveled abroad to join ISIL or were involved in militant groups domestically. Travel and access to local communities were challenging given violent clashes after the killing of militant leader Burhan Wani in Kashmir and ongoing tensions between India and Pakistan. SMART hired local reporters and researchers to undertake interviews in these areas. In some cases, however, the mothers refused to be interviewed because they were afraid of the police or violent extremists. Others were described as being in a state of denial and insisted that their sons were not part of any violent extremist group despite evidence to the contrary.

SMART was able to produce 30 stories for the Mothers on Air podcast, with 15 episodes from Kashmir and Kerala and 15 episodes from Pakistan. These episodes are posted on the Mothers on Air Facebook and Twitter accounts and on the blog Medium.²⁷ The aim of these stories is to evoke an emotional response from the audience by sharing the pain and suffering that mothers experience when their children become victims of terrorism and violent extremism or leave home to join these groups.



Podcast logo. (Seeking Modern Applications for Real Transformation)

27 For the podcast and English transcripts, see “Mothers on Air,” Medium, n.d., <https://medium.com/@mothersonair>.

Although there is increasing recognition of mothers being uniquely placed to detect signs of radicalization to violent extremism, in some instances women lack the knowledge and confidence to intervene or counter extremist ideologies at home. SMART hopes that, by sharing these stories, other mothers will be inspired and garner the courage to speak up against violent extremism within their families and broader communities. In discussions with SMART, some mothers admitted to feeling a sense of empowerment as it was the first time they had an opportunity to voice their concerns and share their pain and loss.

The continuing challenge for SMART and organizations doing similar work is maximizing the reach of these campaigns while ensuring that the messages are getting to target audiences in local communities. About 10,000 people have accessed the content since it was posted online, but given that each episode is around 30 minutes long, most people only listen to the stories for about 15 minutes or less. SMART intends to further edit the stories to about five to seven minutes each and produce shorter one-minute soundbites to attract more listeners. Additionally, SMART is working with local radio stations in Kashmir and Pakistan to broadcast the stories for audiences who may not have access to the internet or social media.

Promoting Positive Alternative Messages in the Maldives

Although one of the most remote and least-populated countries in the region, the Maldives has supplied the largest number per capita of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria, and there is growing concern about Islamist radicalization in the country.²⁸ These trends are supported by a 2015 assessment from the Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN) that found that Islamic studies textbooks across the country promoted intolerance, violent jihad, and other radical views. The study also found that a large part of Maldivian society had accepted certain foreign cultural elements as an indispensable part



Image taken from Facebook campaign “In Other Words,” (Maldivian Democracy Network)

of Islam and conflated them with Maldivian culture. The study concluded that the religious sermons delivered by certain Islamic scholars were alarmingly radical, calling for and promoting jihad and gender biases. The MDN asserts that one of the reasons for rising violent extremism in the Maldives is a lack of available alternative narratives, especially in the local language.

In an effort to help fill this vacuum and with support from the small grants program, the MDN undertook a project to develop the social media campaign “In Other Words” to counter violent extremist narratives. First, a series of discussions were organized with relevant civil society representatives to explore major concerns related to violent extremist narratives and priority areas for producing countermessages. Project staff also attended a “tech camp” in India to learn how to better develop online campaigns against violent extremism.

Utilizing the knowledge gained from the camp and the feedback from the discussions, the MDN compiled and posted 15 video messages on Facebook.²⁹ These short messages touched on topics related to secularism and principles of sharia and jihad. For example, one message, which received almost 2,500 views and generated spirited debate, stated that “we can maintain the best practices and values of Islam in a secular country. As most people assume, secularism is not necessarily

28 Kai Schultz, “Maldives, Tourist Haven, Casts Wary Eye on Growing Islamic Radicalism,” *New York Times*, 18 June 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/18/world/asia/maldives-islamic-radicalism.html?_r=0.

29 “Maldivian Democracy Network,” Facebook, n.d., <https://www.facebook.com/DemocracyNetwork>.

moving away from religion. A country is secular when the state and religion [are] separated. This does not mean we have to change our values and traditions to that of others, nor does it mean that we have to stop being exemplary Muslims.”

The target audience of the campaign was mostly youths, and each video received 50 to 3,000 views. The MDN also utilized other opportunities to spread their messages, for example, through television, radio

appearances, and participation in a youth festival where staff displayed posters with the messages they developed. During the festival, the MDN hosted an event as part of their “Democracy Café” project to inform youths on social issues, current events, democracy, and human rights. During the session, attendees also discussed many of the messages developed by the MDN and spoke frankly about various issues, such as religious principles and violent extremism.

RESULTS AND CHALLENGES

With limited funding, this small grants program demonstrates that opportunities exist to continue supporting community-based P/CVE initiatives in South and Central Asia. Small investments can lead to enhanced knowledge, better partnerships and multi-stakeholder engagements, and more targeted dissemination of counternarratives and alternative messages. Through this project, the Global Center was able to contribute its expertise in helping local implementers refine their project concepts and facilitate capacity-building opportunities. For instance, some implementers were able to participate in trainings to produce counternarrative campaigns.

Although the sample sizes of these research projects are usually small, the findings provide crucial insights into local perceptions of violent extremism that could help to inform larger nationwide studies on this topic. Through these projects, there may be increased opportunities for civil society organizations to partner with academic institutions and researchers on larger studies because they have already established themselves within communities and have a better understanding of local dynamics. Civil society organizations also can utilize their research to develop targeted trainings or intervention programs, share findings with governments, and lobby for policies and measures that are proactive and focus on prevention.

Additionally, the projects highlight the important role that civil society organizations, including those that are women led or women focused, can play in helping to facilitate constructive interactions between and among communities, government, and the security sector. Engagement with law enforcement officials, for example, is critical because the willingness of local populations to work with the police or security sector to identify and address or otherwise mitigate possible threats will depend to a great extent on their belief in the system and positive perceptions of police officers. These types of community engagement projects are

critical for P/CVE in the region when poorly managed law enforcement and hard-security responses have strained relationships between police and citizens.

Furthermore, this program highlights practical ways of engaging different stakeholders, including teachers, families, youth, and private sector representatives, in building more peaceful and resilient communities. For instance, youth leadership programs help to establish young people's desire for civic action and political activism, providing constructive and nonviolent alternatives to enable social and political change. Yet, to sustain these multi-stakeholder engagements, governments and international stakeholders need to ensure space for inclusive dialogue and debate at all levels from regional to local.

Nevertheless, the Global Center and local implementers identified a number of key challenges that affected the initiatives' implementation and impact, which are insightful for future investments.

Definitional and conceptual challenges. It is still challenging for local implementers to develop appropriate interventions due to their unfamiliarity with the concepts, definitions, and scope of work associated with P/CVE, especially because the field itself continues to evolve. Project concepts and designs are usually grounded in other well-established fields such as violence or conflict prevention, peace-building, or human rights; but assessing the direct P/CVE benefit, impact, or outcome of such projects is often difficult.

Vetting local implementers. Grassroots groups and organizations that often are best placed to undertake local P/CVE interventions are sometimes the most difficult to vet because they lack organizational capacity (e.g., formal registration, bank account, full-time staff) and may have limited evidence of past experience, such as an online presence. Strict donor vetting and due diligence requirements often result in these local groups missing valuable opportunities for funding.

Research challenges. Small-scale research projects such as those described in this report provide important granularity to an understanding of the factors driving the spread of violent extremism. Yet, due to a number of organizational and resource constraints, these projects are often less rigorous, include smaller sample sizes, and may not be easily replicated. Local implementers also express difficulty in producing and disseminating their research, often attributed to a lack of qualified staff to analyze the data or limited access or resources for quality editors or translation services.

Security concerns. A number of implementers were unable to travel or had to restrict their travel to operational areas due to safety and security concerns. Additionally, in conflict- and violence-affected areas, it was observed that people were less likely to speak out against extremist violence, mainly out of fear of retribution from political parties or militant groups.

Cultural and political sensitivities. Because of the sensitive nature and focus of most of the projects, implementers reported a challenge in engaging community members. They found that individuals were often hesitant to discuss issues related to religion, norms, customs, and practices, especially as they related to violent extremism. This is compounded by the fact that radicalization and violent extremism are highly politicized terms and often conflated or associated with a particular religion, leading to caution and hesitancy to participate in discussions on the topic.

Shrinking operational space. In some cases, implementers were unable to adequately complete certain activities for their projects due to legal and political restrictions.

For example, restrictions on public discussions around issues related to religious extremism not only limit the ability of civil society organizations to effectively engage in P/CVE efforts, but more broadly interfere with their fundamental rights and freedoms. Some governments also are using counterterrorism and P/CVE-related laws to crack down on dissent.

Engaging and accessing target audience. Implementers reported difficulties in engaging their target audiences for a number of practical reasons. For example, it was challenging to engage students and school officials during holidays or due to work, family, or school commitments. Young people were especially difficult to reach because they were occupied with their studies, had job commitments, or were needed at home. In other instances, the target audience was hesitant or refused to speak about issues related to violent extremism because they were fearful of law enforcement or violent extremists.

Short timelines and budgetary constraints. Implementers often noted that the short timeline allocated for small grants projects (usually about six to eight months due to grant constraints) is insufficient, particularly given the complexity and sensitivities regarding violent extremism and the environments in which these civil society organizations operate. As one implementer noted, “Bringing the people out of their shell requires time, and they tend to engage with enthusiasm only when they are strongly motivated.” Furthermore, implementers were concerned about the limited funds available, especially with an eye to sustaining positive developments beyond the short project timelines.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Many challenges continue to constrain civil society engagement in P/CVE, but there is increasing recognition and support by donor governments, international NGOs, and the private sector for community-based initiatives. Networks and a growing community of practice on P/CVE among civil society and other local actors are being developed to serve in a critical complementary and advisory capacity for national governments and international organizations. The Global Solutions Exchange, for instance, helps to facilitate interactions between governments and independent civil society organizations and provides practical advice for donors to effectively engage with and support civil society P/CVE efforts.³⁰ Additionally, following the international community's recognition that local governments, in partnership with civil society actors, have a crucial role to play in P/CVE, the Strong Cities Network was established in 2015 as the first global network of local- and municipal-level policymakers and practitioners working together to build cohesion and community resilience against violent extremism.³¹ These relationships and partnerships should continue to be leveraged, particularly at the regional and national levels, to ensure comprehensive and collaborative responses to violent extremism.

Among emerging issues in South and Central Asia, many worry about the potential legal, security, health, and social challenges posed by returning FTFs and the capacity of countries to identify, monitor, and detain them or provide rehabilitation and reintegration services. These challenges are complicated by the fact that returnees are not a homogenous group and some may be defectors who return disillusioned, while others return from the conflict zone motivated to conduct attacks in their home countries. Civil society can play

an important role in the rehabilitation and reintegration of individuals associated with and affected by violent extremism. Furthermore, it can draw on critical lessons and success stories of past postconflict disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration and reconciliation efforts to help inform and strengthen rehabilitation and reintegration programming in the region.

Like other regions, South and Central Asia are full of vibrant and passionate civil society organizations and community leaders doing important work on the ground who have critical insights to share and, more importantly, are eager to show how their work is making a difference. Yet, they overwhelmingly express their difficulty in acquiring sustained attention and funding for their work. Although they welcome opportunities for dialogue and information exchange, for instance, through workshops and conferences, they are also wary of these undertakings because they often yield little by way of action and follow-up. Opportunities such as the small grants funding can help them test new ideas and concepts while applying the lessons learned to concretely demonstrate to relevant stakeholders how civil society can enhance overall P/CVE policy and programming.

Based on lessons, insights, and experiences from this small grants process, the following key recommendations are presented for policymakers, practitioners, and other stakeholders to consider as they look to strengthen local, community-based initiatives that contribute toward P/CVE and peaceful and resilient societies within South and Central Asia, particularly through small grants funding mechanisms.

Scale up relevant pilot and short-term projects. Small grants funding is important for pilot projects, but increased funding for programs over the mid- to long term is needed to build on these efforts and sustain

30 Global Solutions Exchange, "Recommendations on Donor Engagement With Civil Society on Preventing Violent Extremism," 21 September 2017, <http://www.gsxpve.org/recommendations-on-donor-engagement-with-civil-society-on-preventing-violent-extremism/>.

31 See Strong Cities Network, <http://strongcitiesnetwork.org/>.

impact. Donors should ensure adequate follow-up funding for civil society organizations if their project concepts prove to be successful and can be replicated in other areas or scaled up. As part of this effort, donors should make available sufficient funds for project monitoring and evaluation, for example, funding program managers to travel or hire local personnel to independently monitor and evaluate projects (if remotely managed).

Provide core organizational support to promising civil society organization partners. Project-based funding ensures accountability, but core funding allows organizations to make important investments in management and financial oversight, monitoring, and evaluation. Predictable funding also gives them a sense of security and freedom to define their own priorities and focus on their core mission.

Allow flexibility in project designs and timelines. Many community-based initiatives require adequate time to undertake confidence-building measures to get local authorities and community members on board. Additionally, for organizations operating in sensitive environments where safety and security conditions may change at any given moment, flexibility should be granted in making adjustments to project deliverables and deadlines.

Facilitate opportunities for technical skills building. Local implementers, particularly those already operating in related fields such as development, conflict prevention, and peace-building, could be supported to allow their participation in specialized P/CVE training to help enhance their expertise in developing, implementing, and monitoring and evaluating P/CVE programming.

Support small-scale, media-based projects. Some local implementers already have a good understanding of

how to develop counternarrative campaigns but lack the capacity or resources to ensure those messages reach target audiences. Private sector companies such as Google and Facebook could be encouraged or incentivized to help these organizations expand their reach or target at-risk communities, particularly in the online space.

Support local capacity development for qualitative and quantitative research. To help enhance the research techniques and analytical abilities of local implementers, pair them with academic researchers. Support could be given for local researchers and organizations to develop platforms for disseminating and archiving their work, including by creating connections with institutions abroad that can translate and publish their work and make it available to wider audiences.

Ensure platforms for sustained cross-country and regional engagement. Support existing regional or national civil society networks and platforms that help to facilitate exchanges among civil society actors for them to connect with each other and to learn from and share their experiences. Interregional or national platforms for dialogue and exchange on P/CVE could also be supported to help enhance knowledge and improve collaboration among civil society, governments, and international donors and stakeholders.

Build strong and enduring partnerships with local actors. With increased support for and engagement with civil society organizations, governments and donors will understand better their needs and the best way to approach P/CVE in their communities. Having a clear and open communications channel with civil society organizations can help to inform P/CVE strategies, programs, and monitoring and evaluation frameworks, ensuring that local priorities are represented and the intricacies of the context are understood.

The Global Center on Cooperative Society works with governments, international organizations, and civil society to develop and implement comprehensive and sustainable responses to complex international security challenges through collaborative policy research, context-sensitive programming, and capacity development. In collaboration with a global network of expert practitioners and partner organizations, the Global Center fosters stronger multilateral partnerships and convenes key stakeholders to support integrated and inclusive security policies across national, regional, and global levels.

The Global Center focuses on four thematic areas of programming and engagement:

- multilateral security policy
- countering violent extremism
- criminal justice and the rule of law
- financial integrity and inclusion

Across these areas, the Global Center prioritizes partnerships with national and regional stakeholders and works to ensure respect for human rights and empower those affected by transnational violence and criminality to inform international action.