ENHANCE COMMUNITY RESILIENT ON COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN MANDERA TRIANGLE

REPORT

RESEARCH ON COMMUNITY NEEDS AND STRATEGY ASSESMENT ON CONTEMPORARY TRIGGERS AND REMEDIES TO RADICALIZATION IN MANDERA TRIANGLE

Executive Summary

YAPAD commissioned research to explore trends of violent extremism in Mandera Triangle in January 2022. This research was done in a bid to find out the cause and changing trends of extremism and help recommend strategies to counter them from the community level using CVE strategies. These strategies included exploring the strengths of relationships between communities, and those of state and non-state actors in countering violent extremism.

The assessment employed a triangulated methodological approach that incorporated literature review, key informant interviews, Focus Group Discussion, and site visits. A total of 171 respondents were reached in the six sub-counties of which 68% were male and 32% female.

The respondents were sampled from religious institutions (Sheikhs, Imams, and Pastors), school teachers, Youth Groups, Peace Committees, Women Institutions, local elders, National and County Government officials, civil society, local media houses, and personnel. . A summary of the key findings of the assessment includes but not limited to the following:

Violent Extremism

Violent extremism and radicalization are rampant in Mandera Triangle and fringe counties and have affected the peace and security of these areas. These issues are perpetrated by individuals and groups who seek change through fear and intimidation.

When disillusioned, most people turn to religion for guidance. Radical Islamic preachers and cyber Sheiks use this loophole to indoctrinate community members into extremism. These preachers exploit common issues such as unemployment, poverty, lack of economic opportunities, marginalization, and victimization of Muslims to radicalize them.

These modern-day Sheikhs provide teachings relevant to the current problems the Muslim community faces which resonates with the youth and women, unlike old traditional Sheikhs who repeat the same sermons that were preached in the olden days.

The Al-Shabaab is one of the biggest recruiters of extremists, especially in the North Eastern corridor. The organization erroneously promises its recruits a monthly salary of $1000, a hefty incentive, especially for youth living in poverty. It also uses peer pressure

and a false sense of identity (duty of a Muslim to defend Islam and fellow Muslims) to radicalize them.

Before the Al-Shabaab problem became prevalent in Kenya, most cases of violent extremism in the North Eastern corridor were caused by the actions of Al-Shabaab sympathizers. These incidents were mostly isolated.

These days, the youth are radicalized, recruited, and deployed to Somalia and other parts of Kenya to perpetrate these heinous acts. Recruiters infiltrate areas such as schools, religious institutions, and correctional facilities.

Incidents such as the Garissa University attacks in 2015, the terrorist attacks in Kwale in 2015, and Lamu in 2017 and 2018 are well-known examples of how impactful Al-Shabaab attacks are.

Other contributing factors include the internationalization of local conflicts (Usalama Watch operation in Nairobi's East Leigh to flush out Al Shabaab militants) and the Kenyan government's decision to deploy its forces to Somalia in 2011 to neutralize the Al-Shabaab threat have all contributed to extremism in the country as a large.

In addition, the domestication of international violent extremism incidents like the Charlie Hebdo attacks in France has also precipitated radicalization and extremism in the country. Killed clerics are idolized as "martyrs," and the inadequate knowledge of Islam by the youths, particularly the new converts, who take any word from the radicals, including Jihad, as holy.

The government's anti-radicalization strategies were also faulted for contributing to more radicalization in the Mandera triangle. In these strategies, Muslims, especially those of Somali origins, are profiled as potential terrorists/extremists. There are extra-judicial killings of "radical" Muslim clerics, and some Muslim community members are denied government services such as issuing national identification, travel and
National Identification Cards.

Role of Women in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)

Violent extremism is a community problem even though it's mainly associated with the male youth (mambo ya vijana). This association has led to women shying away from giving their views on the subject since they believe it doesn't affect them.

Despite this belief, some women in these communities aid these extremists from the background by providing intelligence information such as police movements. They also keep quiet about suspicious activities, with some willingly joining terrorist organizations.

Women are known to have the ability to observe their close relatives and friends covertly. This way, it's possible for them to recognize early signs of radicalization which could be detrimental in catching early cases of radicalization and preventing the rise of violent extremism.

Some of the cited early signs in Mandera include self-isolation and excessive questioning of the "purity" of activities such as weddings terming them as "haram". Some new recruits start wearing short "kanzus" and growing their beards. In the case of radical Islam preachings in Madrassas and Duksis, women can be key in recognizing their early effects because most are very close to their children and siblings.

Civil Society and Existing Strategies

Violent extremism has been a problem for quite a while, and several civil society organizations have set up camps in the North Eastern region, especially in Mandera, to help curb this menace. According to the assessment, most of these organizations lack the technical expertise on extremism and seem to hoard useful programming information.

Civil society organizations in this area use strategies such as peace dialogues, inter-religious forums, drama, and theatre to highlight issues common to the Mandera triangle. These strategies not only raise awareness and preach peace and tolerance but also keep the youths occupied with constructive activities. Although constructive, these strategies also have their limitations, and appropriate conflict management and resolution and CVE strategies should be implemented.

Recommended Strategies

- **Improve the capacity of state and non-state actors to effectively address conflicts and violent extremism issues in the region**: Violent extremism isn't a new phenomenon, and while most organizations lack the technical expertise needed for conflict management, some organizations have the required skillset. What is needed is capacity building for all stakeholders including state and non-state actors through peer regional and national discussion forums on CVE. Regional forums and symposiums especially in the coastal region will be of great help.
- **Counter messaging**: The first step would be to research methods that these radicalizers use to recruit and use them to spread counter-narratives. This should be frequently done in public gatherings, learning institutions, mosques, and media outlets.
- **Strengthen community structures to counter extremism and manage conflict**: This can be done using mechanisms that bring communities together including inter-faith dialogue forums, intra, and inter-community meetings, and cultural events.
- **Amnesty, Rehabilitation, and Re-integration:** There is also a need to lobby the county and national government to provide an Amnesty that would allow returnees to come back, be rehabilitated and re-integrated back into society. Such returnees would also be used in outreach activities to dispel the notion that joining extremist groups is cool.
- **Gender and youth integration**: We have discussed the role of women both in perpetuating and preventing CVE. They can be trained to prevent CVE by being peace ambassadors, and using the proper channels to report suspicious activities. This can be done by:

- **Social reconciliation and Trauma healing:** Unhealed trauma could also beget violence. Therefore, there is a need to undertake social reconciliation and trauma healing activities, especially for those counties where extremism has resulted in the destruction of lives to enable the healing of the affected individuals and communities.
- **Eventual CVE roll-out:** With VE in the Mandera triangle being blamed partly on the county's proximity to Somalia and by extension border areas of Kenya and

Ethiopia, there is a critical need to expand the scope of the YAPAD program or any other CVE programming to those areas.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background Information

The Mandera Triangle of Kenya is experiencing stretches of radicalization and violent extremism mostly because of its close geographical proximity to extremist strongholds in Somalia, deep-rooted unaddressed historical injustices, marginalization (both real and perceived), indoctrination, and high unemployment rates among the youth.

The Enhancing Community Resilience on Countering Extremism Program was designed to respond to the radicalization and violent extremism in the Mandera Triangle and areas in Kenya facing similar challenges. P/CVE is an Activity (program) of the Knowledge Management Fund (KMF) that is being implemented by Young African for Peace and Development (YAPAD) in the Mandera Triangle.

This assessment provides research-backed information that ekes out priority issues that will inform decision-making for programming and execution of SCORE and other similar initiatives. SCORE is an excellent software that provides education and mentorship to entrepreneurs.

The CVE program aims to evaluate the factors contributing to the rise in violent extremism and provide recommendations on how the community, state, and non-state actors can work together to counter it.

1.2 Objectives of the community Needs and Strategy Assessment (CNSA)

The following were the main objectives of the CNSA:

- Undertake a community assessment on understanding the contemporary triggers of radicalization into violent extremism in Mandera Triangle
- Map existing capacities for Countering Violent Extremism
- Assess the validity of findings that may be pertinent to the present study 1.3

Methodology

The CNSA adopted both primary and secondary methods of data collection. 171 respondents were used in Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) to provide primary data. Out of the 171 respondents, 68% were male and 32% female. These respondents included government authorities, religious groups and leaders such as Sheikhs and Pastors, private sector members, civil society organizations working on conflict, VE and governance, women leaders, youth, school heads, and Somali elders.

Those that showed up for the interviews also recommended that the victims of terrorism be involved in the discussions to provide in-depth answers to some of the questions.

The assessment studied the existing literature on CVE in Mandera Triangle from government sources, local stakeholders, Civil Society Organizations, and the media. This literature review informed the discussion and interpretation of study results and helped identify information gaps concerning CVE in Mandera.

The data collected underwent quantitative and quantitative data analysis methods to enhance the quality of the recommendations offered to identify and counter conflict and violent extremism in the region.

1.4 Understanding the contemporary triggers of radicalization into violent extremism in Mandera Triangle

The first question was to describe the respondents' understanding of the meaning of violent extremism. 171 respondents generally interpreted the term to mean "an erroneous interpretation of religion (Islam) to cause violence."

These respondents further noted the rigidity that radicalists portray especially in religion, which makes it impossible for them to empathize with people with contrary beliefs. They consistently linked violent extremism with insecurity and clannism in Mandera Triangle.

1.5 Main concerns about violent extremism

The KIIs and FGDs further highlighted the ongoing violence caused by violent extremists. The acts of violence discussed include the continual killing of innocent civilians, assassinations of leaders, and destruction of property.

The ongoing violence has led to the displacement of people from most regions in the country, the destruction of towns, and the committal of "atrocities on human rights, particularly on women and children." These respondents also expressed their worry, especially regarding the stunted economic growth and development as well as security issues brought on by violent extremism.

Affected communities worry that not enough action is taken to counter and prevent violent extremism and that these twisted ideologies are taking root in their communities.

1.6. Vulnerabilities to violent extremism

Violent extremism affects the entire community but groups such as youth, the elderly, children, women, low-income households, and minority clans, are seen as being more vulnerable to violent extremism. Factors such as lack of education, employment and poverty are major contributors to this conclusion.

Second, high-profile community members such as politicians, religious leaders, clan elders, and the highly educated are seen as targets for acts of violent extremism. These community members are vulnerable due to their status, leadership potential, and ability to speak out against violent extremism.

Third, youth were the most frequently mentioned group by the respondents and were widely seen as being the most vulnerable to violent extremism. Respondents stated that youth are the most vulnerable in terms of being radicalized and in being affected by violent extremism. As one respondent put it, "they [youth] are killing and being killed." Youth were seen as being particularly vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment as "they do not have access at all to any means and do not have many alternative paths."

2.0. Causes and risk factors

2.1. Factors affecting youth and violent extremism

The factors that drive youth into violent extremism replicate throughout the globe, especially in Somalia. Drivers such as unemployment and limited options make the youth vulnerable especially because these extremist groups offer paid employment.

The lured youth see these opportunities as a way to build their future and that of their families. Other factors include the twisted interpretation of Islam discussed earlier in this

document and the fact as these youth use violent extremism as a way to address societal injustices.

In the Mandera Triangle especially, these factors also fuelled clan conflicts and tahrib (immigration). For instance, clans utilize violent extremist groups as a method for getting revenge. A young person will be nominated by the clan, or volunteer, to join a violent extremist group in order to forward the clan's agenda for revenge on another clan.

Third, community tensions that were cited as contributing to violent extremism included unequal resource distribution among different clans, unequal division of government and NGO jobs among clans, and the imbalance of the 4.5 formula.

As an example, one respondent discussed the building of the river canal in the Mandera Triangle, stating that this project needs to be equally shared between the various clans including contractors and workers. The respondent went on to state that all of the smaller and marginalized clans are looking for this type of equity, but that the bigger, powerful, dominant clans maintain the status quo.

The fourth factor listed by respondents included a more general lack of opportunities including the lack of education, poverty, and general hopelessness about the future. Many young people lack education, while others don't develop employability after school.

2.2. Mechanisms for youth radicalization

During these discussions, respondents gave several mechanisms that radical groups use to recruit the youth. Familiarity is one of them. Recruited members of these radicalized groups usually convince their friends and relatives to join them.

These organizations also use religious influencers such as Quranic teachers to romanticize violent extremism.

The discussions also covered how easy it is for radicalized organizations to recruit youth from urban centers such as Mandera. These areas have government buildings, busy markets, and hotels as well as idle youth that can easily be lured for quick cash.

Extremist organizations also have radicalization centers and some youth voluntarily visit them for screening and recruitment.

3.0 Resiliency factors

Mandera Triangle already has a number of existing resiliency factors preventing and countering violent extremism. First, members of the community are actively working to prevent and counter violent extremism. Second, are the existing P/CVE initiatives and activities. Third, the local culture and religion contain the means of preventing and countering violent extremism. These factors will be discussed in the following section.

4.0 Actors involved in P/CVE

The discussions further moved to the involvement of six key actors in P/CVE: elders, religious leaders, women, and youth, police, and government authorities.

Elders, for instance, were praised because of their role in solving community conflict, raising awareness, and refusing violent extremism when radicalized groups reach out to them. Mandera has five radio stations that call upon elders to speak on P/CVE. Aside from the positives, these elders also live in fear, especially because of constant intimidation from these extremists.

In Mandera, women use their collective agency to mobilize the community to speak on P/CVE. The youth too play their part in the fight against violent extremism by raising awareness during gatherings such as sporting and musical events. Youth respondents also alluded to he need for more support especially from stakeholders such as the government and NGOs to increase the effectiveness of their efforts.

When it comes to the government levels, respondents cited minimal help from the police and the government. They recommend a collective effort by state and non-state organizations to solve violent extremism.

5.0 Current P/CVE initiatives

According to the respondents, the Mandera Triangle has witnessed several P/CVE activities to curb violent extremism including awareness raising by women and youth. These groups raise awareness through broad topics such as elections, peacebuilding, government projects, security, or WASH initiatives.

Local NGOs, INGOs CSOs, and the UN are also at the forefront and create workshops to raise awareness. Efforts by these organizations don't have a serious effect because of the lack of trust and coordination between them. Respondents also complained of the low attendance in most NGO workshops where the broader community isn't involved in the discussions.

5.1 Role of culture/ religion in P/CVE

From the discussions, it was determined that culture plays a big role in combating violent extremism especially because Somalis have cultural philosophies that dispel the problem. According to Somali culture, seven social groups shouldn't be harmed even during war; women, children, intellectuals, religious leaders, traditional leaders, business people, and the elderly.

> Strengthening the Somali culture will give these communities an identity which will start the repairs in societal, political, and religious divisions. Respondents agreed that there needs to be a focus on true interpretations of Islam and a re-emphasis of Somali culture.

> Respondents saw that their cultural customs, religion, and political traditions have been weakened by outside influences. Religiously, Somali scholars have been overwhelmed by initiatives coming from the Middle East including Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt.

6.0 Conclusion and recommendations

The discussions brought to light the roles for each member of society in fighting violent extremism but there's still significant work to be done. Here are some recommended strategies from the discussions:

1.   Community Awareness Raising: There should be more activities to raise awareness of radicalization and methods of recruitment by these radicalized groups. These events should also dissociate violent extremism from Somali culture and Islam.

2.   Skills Training: Skills trainings and vocational programs will help manage youth unemployment rates. While respondents were largely vague about the form this skills training should take, programs such as entrepreneurship schemes and training for specific professions such as mechanics or tailoring.

3.   **Social Opportunities:** These include sporting events and theatre which could be used as opportunities to help spread a counter-narrative.

4.   **Cross Border Cooperation**. Across the KIIs and FGDs, respondents highlighted the need for an approach to P/CVE that goes beyond Mandera Triangle itself. P/CVE is a county and national issue and the respondents would like to participate in dialogue and to coordinate at these levels. This could take a wide variety of forms such as hosting a regional conference on P/CVE and inviting representatives from different cities and stakeholder groups.

5.   **Improve the relationship between state and non-state actors:** The relationship between communities, civil society, and state agencies such as the Anti-Terrorism Police Unit (ATPU) is at its lowest in Mandera Triangle. This has made it difficult for communities to share information with state actors mandated with countering extremism. The relationship between Muslim youth and the police in particular needs to be repaired and restored the soonest as possible. Open public dialogues and forums, training of security agents on human rights and promoting community policing are some of the activities that can be supported to improve this relationship that is key to CVE.

6.   **Intra and Inter-Religious dialogues to counter extremist narratives:** Intra and inter-religious dialogues should be supported to defeat the Jihadist agenda of driving a wedge between Muslims and Christians in the Mandera Triangle. Such dialogues could also identify and regularly update Islamic narratives that have been misinterpreted by the Jihadis and come up with correct narratives to counter the same. Such dialogue should also extend to schools and prisons that have been identified as hubs of radicalization in the county.

7.   **Strengthening technical capacities of CSOs in CVE:** There is a need to provide training and technical assistance to CSOs and local government bodies in Mandera Triangle in CVE. This should also include county-based research, policy reviews, networking, conflict sensitivity in service delivery training, and training County officials on alternative dispute resolutions.

8.   **Rehabilitation and Re-integration of returnees**: Re-integration of returnees through psychosocial support, linkage to funds such as Uwezo and Youth funds, and

provision of alternative livelihood options can go a long way in rehabilitating and reintegrating returnees. Returnees could then be used as role models in countering Jihadist narratives including the false promise of jobs in Somalia.

9.   Empower and equip women to meaningfully participate in CVE: Programs such as the KMF CVE program could facilitate a safe space for women to dialogue VE issues through such organizations and or forums like women for Peace based in Mandera Triangle. Such dialogue could come up with women-led and home-based CVE strategies.

10.   Community peace dialogues: Dialogues with clear outputs mediated by peace committee including inter-religious dialogues, and dialogues between youth and elderly community members.

11.   Capacity building on CVE among all stakeholders: There is a need to train key stakeholders such as CSOs, peace committees, youth and women groups, and security agencies on violent extremism and how to counter it. The content of such training should include tips on how to identify radicalization tendencies amongst the youth and the role of mosque communities in identifying and countering jihadist narratives.

12.   ADR mechanisms: Strengthen and promote traditional/alternative conflict resolution mechanisms e.g. Maslah Council of Elders. Link such institutions to other processes like peace committees, County Land Boards/Tribunals and livestock Committees to address the rampant clan conflicts.