This article examines the roles peace and development actors can play in preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE). It discusses key issues and concerns regarding violence and extremism from conflict, security and development lens, and highlights some preventive ways in which peace and development actors could engage in PCVE.

Introduction

Countries affected by armed conflict encounter extremism of various kinds. This includes those linked to religious radicalisation, identity and nationalism, right-wing extremism, inequality and injustice, as well as political violence. There is an intrinsic link between conflict and violent extremism, whereby the former breeds the latter and vice versa. Violent extremism in conflict-affected countries disrupts security and development and reverses peacebuilding gains. Moreover, it also deteriorates social cohesion between communities that are already divided by conflicts. As such, the article addresses the question of how local peace and development actors can play a role in preventing or at least reducing the prevalence of violent extremism.

Peace and development actors refer to non-government and civil society organisations involved in driving change for peace, security and development at the local and national levels. Building durable peace would require, among other things, satisfying ‘basic human needs’ such as survival needs, wellbeing needs, identity needs and freedom needs (Galtung 1980). Economic wellbeing and development are necessary to sustain peace (Buchanan 2014). Therefore, peacebuilding and development practices complement each other and are pertinent in preventing violent extremism.

Countering Violent Extremism: Issues and Concerns through the Conflict, Security and Development Lens

The nexus between conflict and extremist violence

Considering the varied definitions, this article broadly defines violent extremism as the willingness to use violence, or support the use of violence, to advance particular political, ideological and social beliefs (Nasser-Eddine, Garnham, Agostino & Caluya 2011). Conflict and violent extremism have a reciprocal relation. Countries affected by armed conflicts experience fragile security situations, bad governance, organised crimes, social and economic inequalities, and political instability that enable extremist groups to mobilise. When extremism is a result of intractable conflict, violent and dispersed non-state armed outfits proliferate, with many using weapons and armed fighters; they even infiltrate political parties and create new terrorist groups, making a conflict complicated to resolve (Oliva, 2015; Quinney & Coyne 2011). Preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) in the field is linked to the underlying conflict, security risks and development initiatives (Holmer 2013). However, these links are either understudied or undermined. The predominant use of force to counter violent extremism could undermine peacbuilding efforts at the fragile nexus between conflict, security and extremism.
Between 1989 and 2014, more than 88 percent of all terrorist attacks occurred in countries experiencing or involved in an ongoing conflict. This figure demonstrates inherent links between conflict and violent extremism. Conversely, less than 0.6 percent of terrorist attacks have occurred in countries that are not experiencing ongoing conflict and violence (IEP, 2015: 71). Between 1992 and 2012, 26 sub-national conflicts have occurred at the margins of relatively strong, as well as weak, states in South and Southeast Asia (SSEA) (Parks, Colletta, & Oppenheim 2013). These conflicts zones are home to armed groups including extremist and terrorist groups. This also reveal the links between conflict and extremism at a regional level, but moreover countering violent extremism in SSEA must obviously entail dealing with conflict and building peace.

Indeed, existing conflicts breed extremism. The latter in turn produces far worse dynamics of violence, which is inflicted by both local and foreign actors and harms people locally as well as far afield. For instance, ongoing ethnic-religious violence led by Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) in Sri Lanka, and Buddhist monks against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar is predominantly inflicted by local groups, which have adverse consequences for politics, economy, security, national reconciliation and social cohesion. Addressing the violence between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar is necessary to achieve social justice, social cohesion and address national reconciliation in order to build peace in Myanmar. Additionally, conflict zones across the world have been targets for expansion and recruitment by foreign or transnational extremist groups such as the Islamic State (IS). The so-called IS Wilayats (governorates) and local affiliates and supporters are located in war zones in Syria and Iraq as well as other conflict affected countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, the Philippines, and Indonesia (Gunaratna & Hornell-Scott, 2016). Thus the impact of violence emerging from the nexus between conflict and extremism is pervasive. Extremism affects peace and conflict dynamics not only at the local level but also across borders. As such, both local and transnational impacts of violence have to be central foci in PCVE policies and actions.

**Securitisation of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) discourse to a ‘soft security approach’**

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the CVE policies adopted by Western developed countries took an ‘interventionist’ approach, also known as the ‘hard security approach.’ This approach involves surveillance, policing and the implementation of anti-terror laws (Spalek & Imtoual, 2007). The lack of a clear distinction between the concepts of ‘extremism’, radicalisation and ‘terrorism’ amongst countries waging the ‘War on Terror’ culminated in a policy discourse that favoured military solutions to combat extremism.

With the rise of what is known as ‘home grown’ extremism (see COPS, 2014) in developed countries, PCVE policies have gradually tended to combine the hard security approach with what is known as the ‘soft security approach.’ The soft security approach is based on understanding social, cultural and political drivers of violence, including the contexts and dynamics that enable extremist ideas to emerge, grow and sustain (Stern, 2009). This approach facilitates community partnerships and social integration, and aims at promoting social cohesion. For example, such an approach has been adopted by Australia through its ‘Living Together Safe’ Programme and the ‘Building Community Grants Programme’ (BCGP). However, the US and other Western countries continue to elude ‘soft security’ when it comes to dealing with extremism abroad. Even though there is a growing recognition of involving multi-
stakeholder partnerships - engaging the community, youth, women, religious leaders and the private sector - yet, militarism remains a major approach in fighting extremism in the Middle East and Africa for many Western countries such as the US, UK, France and Australia (Holmer, 2013).

The combination of hard security intervention with a soft security approach for PCVE indicates a gradual policy shift in dealing with extremism, at least in principle. But in practice, it also exhibits an inherent contradiction because while it encourages some form of partnership between security forces and local actors, it also simultaneously continues to securitise PCVE policies and actions on the ground through the ways in which security forces are involved in implementation. Ideally the blending of a hard security approach with a soft security approach may be desirable in dealing with extremely violent groups such as IS. However, the way in which all forms of extremism is constructed as a national and/or international security threat, not only securitises the PCVE discourse but also limits the roles that peace and development actors can play as peacebuilders locally. Examples from Kenya and Uganda, among others, have demonstrated how de-securitisation can actually work, in the sense of how PCVE policies and programmes determine the extent to which peace and development actors rather than security forces bring positive changes through PCVE actions. The Kenya Community Support Centre (KECOSCE) in Kenya and the Uganda Muslim Youth Development Forum (UMYDF) in Uganda, for instance, made notable contributions to increasing the resilience of youth by disseminating counter-narratives to violent extremism and providing safe space for dialogue among the communities, with public institutions, local government officials, politicians and development actors dealing with grievances so that it ultimately fosters social cohesion (Hadji & Hassan, 2014).

Emerging enabling policy environment

In the last decade, several initiatives have culminated in the broadening of policy and frameworks that are likely to foster peace and development actors’ proactive roles in preventing extremism. In 2006, the United Nations adopted the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. In 2014, this culminated in the UN Security Council Resolution 2178, which encourages UN member states to counter violent extremism as the first step to preventing terrorism. The Resolution also urges the empowerment of youth, families, women, religious, cultural and educational leaders and other relevant members of civil society in PCVE. Similarly, UN Security Council Resolution 2250, adopted in 2015, urges member states to increase representation of youth at the decision-making levels, including in government institutions, as a mechanism to counter violent extremism. The Amman Youth Declaration on Youth, Peace and Security 2015 provides another notable framework to facilitate youth participation in preventing and countering violence (Global Forum on Youth Peace and Security, 2015). Likewise, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which highlight the imperatives of peace and human security for sustainable development, also encourages a multi-stakeholder collaboration at different levels, between state and non-state actors, to achieve peace, security and development.

In February 2016, the UN Secretary General presented his Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, which will be reviewed by the General Assembly later in 2016. Coming from the highest authority in the UN system, the Plan calls not only for hard security counter-terrorism measures but also systematic preventive action to address the underlying causes and drivers of radicalisation and extremism (UN, 2015).

Despite these policy innovations at a global scale, the extent to which peace and development actors can involve themselves in PCVE works at the local level will depend largely on several national and local factors.
PCVE works at the local level will depend largely on several national and local factors. This includes the willingness and ability of a state to develop a National Plan of Action on PCVE and what space the plan will have in which to forge a partnership between government, security and non-government actors. One sure way to make this work would be to involve the ‘grassroots’ and civil society in developing the plan with state. In the absence of such a National Plan of Action, peace and development actors may miss out on formal recognition of a function they are capable of performing well at the grass roots. Without formal recognition, peacebuilding and development actors may be able to coordinate with government, but they would most likely lack legitimacy and necessary institutional support. They may require support from the government for their own protection in the course of carrying out the peace and development work that enables them to engage in violence prevention. The lack of recognition and/or legitimacy can result in peace and development actors themselves becoming targets of security forces, as well as extremist armed groups. Consequently, peace and development actors may end up either ignoring extremism and violence or operating in isolation from the mainstream PCVE discourse.

Way forward

Developing early warning/early response system

Peacebuilding and development actors around the world have specialised in developing early warning indicators of violence, which includes collection and analysis of data and dissemination of information to prevent violence before it occurs. For instance, after the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Government of Sri Lanka signed a ceasefire agreement in 2002, violence broke out in an eastern town in Sri Lanka after non-Christian groups destroyed 14 Crosses. Following this incident, the Foundation for Co-Existence (FCE) implemented a citizen-based early warning / early response system in the eastern province which was based on a database of forecasting and analysis of potential violence involving local people. These were instrumental in preventing further violence. Similarly, the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) in collaboration with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) developed a set of indicators for monitoring violence that could potentially lead to violent extremism and religious fundamentalism in West Africa and the Sahel in October 2014 (West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, 2014). This kind of monitoring proved to be preventative.

Early warning / early response systems works well if they engage local people and are linked to the formal top-down system for response to violence. In Sri Lanka, the FCE-led early warning system could not sustain because it was not linked to the formal ceasefire mechanism, whereas the system developed by WANEP was well connected to the macro-level institution, the ECOWAS. Human rights organisations, including community-based organisations, and women’s organisations can collaborate with local security agencies, especially community police to share information needed to counter threats (van Ginkel, 2012). However, it should be ensured that information sharing does not lead to increased security threats to local peace and development organisations themselves.

Disseminating non-violent counter narratives

Because of their continuous presence at the local level, peace and development actors are better suited to develop and disseminate nonviolent counter-narratives to prevent violent extremism. The case of Nahdatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, the faith-based civil society...
organisations in Indonesia, indicates how civil society organisations can disseminate counter-narratives to violent extremism effectively. In collaboration with local human rights organisations, women, civil groups and local government authorities, these faith-based organisations have disseminated non-violent narratives based on Islam through existing networks such as mosques, schools, hospitals, savings collectives and other forms of delivery services (Zeiger, 2016). Similarly, in Germany, the ‘Mothers’ for Life’ network formed by the German Institute for Radicalisation and De-radicalisation advocates the spread of counter-narratives to jihadist radicalisation, and provides a platform for mothers who have experienced violent jihadist radicalisation in their own families (GIRDS, n.d.).

In this regard, peace and development actors utilise education to promote and foster nonviolence, religious and ideological tolerance and social cohesion.

**Integrating Conflict Sensitivity (CS) approach to PCVE**

Peacebuilding and development agencies apply conflict sensitivity in their work as an approach in conflict-affected areas. Three key principles of conflict sensitivity include 1) understanding context, 2) understanding the interaction between context and development or peacebuilding interventions, and 3) identifying opportunities to minimise negative impacts of an intervention and maximise positive impacts (Haider, 2014). Integrating these principles makes peacebuilding and development work effective and helps avoid negative consequences. Any intervention targeted to prevent or counter violent extremism inherently interacts with the existing conflict and power dynamics. The possibility of producing either good or bad results depends on the extent to which the actors involved in PCVE are aware of and capable to respond to these dynamics. If the local people, whom the intervention is targeting, do not see the intervention as being neutral or supporting a particular side, then it could worsen the conflict dynamics. This is where a hard security approach alone can produce negative consequences. For instance, indiscriminate violence by government security forces pushed more youth to support the violent Maoist cause in Nepal (Subedi, 2013). Conflict sensitivity could therefore be used as a tool to ensure that intervention for PCVE will not worsen the existing conflict but rather help to transform the situation and build peace.

Peace and development actors who work with local communities have a better understanding of local conflict and security dynamics. Therefore, they are in a better position to share important information that can be useful for both security and non-security actors, which can then be used to design PCVE interventions in ways that increase positive impacts and decrease negative effects. However, the information coming from some local actor may not necessarily be neutral; therefore, it may require careful verification in at least some situations.

**Building safe space for dialogue**

Dialogue and interaction is necessary to build trust between socially, culturally and linguistically different groups and also to redress false assumptions and negative attitudes towards the other, which fuels extremism. Local community groups are suitable to this role. For instance, in Indonesia, the Gusdurian network has created a secure platform for dialogue, which brings together youth mainly in Yogyakarta to discuss and debate religious identity, respect and celebrate the diversity of young Muslims and discuss social solidarity amongst Muslim youth (Zeiger, 2016). In this regard, the peacebuilding community has significant experience of creating safe spaces for interfaith dialogue in order to prevent conflict (Smock, 2002). Peacebuilding actors can transfer this experience and lessons learned to the field of preventing extremist violence.

**Promoting an inclusive and integrated approach**

Apart from relying exclusively on security...
agencies, an integrated approach involving the government, civil society, youth, women and the private sector is necessary in order to prevent extremism effectively. Caution should be taken to ensure that collaboration between security forces and non-security actors does not reinforce a belligerent securitisation. The lack of linkages between policies at the national level with local level initiatives for reducing social injustices and inequalities and poverty alleviation was a contributing factor for the failure of liberal peacebuilding in Afghanistan (Paris, 2013). Indeed, the value of local actors in peacebuilding, development and violence prevention is undisputable; however, the way in which the micro process is linked to the macro process and vice versa is a gap in PCVE programming. Local peace and development actors are well positioned to mitigate this gap, provided that their role is formally recognised in the relevant policies at the national level.

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