Preventing Violent Extremism and Peacebuilding
Perspectives and Prospects

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Introduction

In the post-9/11 world, violent extremism (VE) (both religious and right-wing) emerged as a major threat to national security for the state as the political entity and the existing liberal order. Governments across the globe are facing diverse and complex challenges to deal with this menace. Countries started using the countering violent extremism (CVE) approach to fight VE. But as the dynamics of extremism continued to grow and evolve over time, it faced many significant challenges both as a policy and in practice. Some of these challenges are deemed to have stemmed from its origins in the security and defence arena. It was opined that predominantly military-based CVE approach tended to address only the
symptoms of VE, rather than the drivers that urged people to be drawn into VE. In many cases, extreme CVE measures can lead to human rights abuses or stigmatize an identity group, which can even aggravate tensions and trigger more support for VE. Hence, the CVE approach is considered to be less effective over a long period of time and cannot provide a sustainable solution to the VE problem. Many critics of current approaches for CVE very often suggest to reflect the perspective of peacebuilding as an alternative approach to ensure a long-term solution to the problem. The notion is not completely extraneous in the context of a contemporary upsurge of VE. Violent extremism and conflict continue to be one of the biggest threats to international peace, security and development. Furthermore, the relation between conflict and extremism is now closer than ever, as the Global Terrorism Index reports that over 99 per cent of all deaths from terrorism has happened in countries that were involved in a violent conflict or had high levels of political terror. On the other hand, the preventing violent extremism (PVE) approach is focused on addressing the underlying conditions that relate to the spread of VE.

The PVE approach is multifaceted and implicates numerous actors and stakeholders. It is broader than CVE, focusing on preventative measures to concentrate on the drivers that create vulnerabilities among population towards VE. Opinion persists that it is not adequate to only CVE, it needs to be prevented which requires creating ‘soft power’ to prevent the threat compelled by confusing elucidations of culture, animosity, and unawareness. It is widely believed that violent extremists are not born that way, rather the radicalization process that leads people towards violence can be prevented or even reversed. Thus, taking pragmatic measures in collaboration with all stakeholders can help disabling the conducive environment leading to VE. Likewise, successful peacebuilding activities create an environment reassuring self-sustaining, long-lasting peace; bring together opponents; inhibit conflicts from resuming; assimilate civil society; form instruments for rule of law and focus on fundamental structural and communal concerns.

Therefore, the rise and transformative nature of VE and the concept of PVE has prompted much discussion within peacebuilding communities around the world, about how they can interact with each other. In this backdrop, the present chapter intends to highlight few points of interaction and tension between these two concepts to look for probable
recommendations so that they can complement each other in an effective way.

**PVE and Peacebuilding: Mutual Relationship**

PVE is the latest approach adopted by the states in fighting VE. In fact, the United Nations (UN) has launched a ‘Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism’ in 2016. The concept of PVE refers to an approach which aims to address the root causes of VE through non-coercive approaches. The Government of Switzerland describes PVE as ‘depriving violent extremism of its breeding ground by enhancing the capacity of individuals and communities to resist it’. In its plan of action, the UN defines PVE as ‘systematic preventive measures which directly address the drivers of violent extremism’. Defining VE, on the other hand, is not a straightforward task. There is no single internationally accepted definition of VE and literature overflows with many contending definitions. In general, VE refers to the use of violence in line with an ideological commitment to achieve political, religious, or social goals. Peacebuilding itself is also a relatively new concept that the UN is incorporating in its peace missions.

Moving from the traditional peacekeeping approach, peacebuilding is an interventionist procedure or method that is intended to avoid the start or restitution of violent conflict by crafting a sustainable peace. The UN defines peacebuilding as “a complex, long-term process of creating the necessary conditions for sustainable peace”. Peacebuilding activities deal with the root causes or prospective motives for violence, raise a societal expectancy for conflict resolution in a peaceful manner, and alleviate society politically or socioeconomically. Violent extremism is a driver of conflict and often spoils peacebuilding efforts. Therefore, peacebuilders, through the broader conflict prevention agenda, have to work on preventing extremist violence. Since peacebuilding incorporates a holistic approach, it inevitably includes the root causes for VE as well, even though there are debates on the effectiveness of merging both the concepts.

There are a number of ways that the two approaches of PVE and peacebuilding have similarities in their processes. The objectives of
peacebuilding and PVE are wide-ranging in approach as well as in the inclusion of varied actors and segments of the community, viz. young people, women, religious or community leaders, administration and security actors, teachers, and businessmen. It can be inferred that there is much possible intersection amid the two concepts. The UN ‘Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism’ also makes connections between preventing conflicts and PVE.\textsuperscript{12}

This intersection includes both the goals they promote and their methods of function. However, while some see opportunities where the agenda of PVE and peacebuilding overlap with each other, while the others disagree as they believe that it is an agenda that distracts from the actual sources of conflict, and could in fact undercut peacebuilding efforts.\textsuperscript{13} Supporters of this view consider ‘PVE’ as a threat for the peacebuilding community. An impending accusation is: the PVE discourse has originated in and primarily been owned by Western states and the programmes for PVE is predominantly intended to be used against the Muslim community, stirring Islamophobia. Furthermore, the ‘violent extremism’ prism inclines to lead people with emphasis on the activities of non-state actors and armed groups, overlooking the state-sponsored violence or deeper drivers of conflicts that a peacebuilding approach entails.

**Can the Perspective of Peacebuilding be Useful for PVE?**

In regard to answering the question whether peacebuilding can assist in PVE, there are two different points of views among the academics and practitioners. These two views contrast greatly with each other. The first point of view believes that peacebuilding and PVE are not compatible with each other, since they derive from two different school of thoughts. It is thought that as a field, peacebuilding appears from the ‘idealist’ rather than the ‘realist’ power epitome (power politics), that rules international relations and diplomacy among states. Thus, its principles and practices in reacting to conflicts are founded on human relations, consideration, partnership and mutual aid, shared credit, and pacifism.

In contrast, ‘realism’ identifies the gap between ‘expected’ world order based on principles of harmony, law and morality and the real state of affairs based on self-interest. It assumes that due to lack of supranational
authority, the world structure is anarchic and that the predominant goals of states are to chase and preserve self-interest and maximize power to achieve security in a ‘self-help’ world. Therefore, no nation is ‘expected to indulge in altruism at the cost of any serious sacrifice of its interests.’ Hence, PVE is based on the ‘realist’ model since it considers order and security as the end result and designed by governments to protect state interests and does not concentrate much on fairness, collaboration, non-violence, etc. Another concern is that the pragmatic approach of realism does not affect the ideology of people or community; it intends to reinstate the unequal situation that prevailed before the commencement of violence. In most cases, the agendas of PVE do not enclose conflict analysis which necessitates exploration of the related factors liable for violence, such as grievances arising out of exploitation by state, malpractices, foreign intrusion, marginalization, fractured relations, lack of voice and opportunity, and scuffles with diversity. PVE programmes also sometimes fail to integrate relationship strengthening, tolerance, empathy and resolution while designing its objectives.

On the other hand, in the second point of view, it is argued by some peacebuilders that there is a possibility of engaging with PVE agendas and partly uphold the ‘idealist’ notion of peacebuilding. It has been opined that peacebuilding activities, such as promoting good governance and security sector reform; upholding human rights and increasing opportunities for all; and tackling political, social and economic exclusion, if applied at all levels, can make a significant contribution to PVE. However, many of them are of the opinion that both the programmes undertake the same kind of actions using the same framing; but for funding purposes and security endorsement, a tendency prevails to label the programme as PVE. There is also an apprehension among many that using the concepts of ‘violent extremism’ would mean accepting a donor-driven agenda that will prioritize the security needs of donor countries and not focus on the needs of local populations. Regardless of the fact, the following scope for positive interaction between peacebuilding and PVE may be considered.

Despite these debates, there are many ways in which peacebuilding perspective may intersect with the ‘PVE’ agenda, such as learning from the experiences and approaches of the experts working on relevant
programmes. For example, there are researches on narratives and factors contributing to an individual or a group deciding to join or support a violent extremist movement. There is no single cause for the rise of VE, it stems from multiple and complex factors. Therefore, understanding of this research and related programming can help peacebuilders improve their own work. This experience may provide insight into building communities that are resilient to the pulling pressure of violent extremist groups.\textsuperscript{18}

Moreover, PVE programmes may create opportunities for peacebuilders to engage in policy debates for ensuring a wider, early and more preemptive peacebuilding approach. Peacebuilders possess an exceptional set of norms, best practices and analytical tools which are also useful in PVE. Violent extremism is a multifaceted problem which comes in diverse forms and can take numerous expressions depending on its changing context.\textsuperscript{19} Peacebuilders are familiar with working in fragile environments where roles, identities, and relationships often change dramatically,\textsuperscript{20} thus are better suited to understand the underlying dynamics that causes people to turn to VE. Due to this skill set, they have the ability to empower the state, civil societies, vulnerable sections of a society to proactively respond to extremism, and can also enable individuals in selecting positive, peaceful options in conflict situations. Since the countries most affected by terrorism and countries hosting UN peace operations continue to overlap, UN peace operations are adapting their approaches without compromising their doctrinal foundations, to confront VE.\textsuperscript{21} In many parts of the world, peacebuilding approach is being employed by practitioners for PVE. The two following cases in Nigeria and Uganda, demonstrate how peacebuilding action such as reforming the education sector and reintegration of former warriors into the society can aid in PVE.

\textit{Case Study 1:} Hamsatu Allamin has steered an initiative in Borno state of northeastern Nigeria, for bringing together the civil society organizations including women organizations, local government, religious scholars and schools to convert the wider belief in the inconsistency of ‘Western’ education and Islam that inspires the narrative promoted by Boko Haram.\textsuperscript{22} In a radio programme in local language, Boko Haram’s anti-education ideology was challenged
through introducing community discussions and engaging Islamic intellectuals. As a result, there was a 40 per cent increase in school enrolment in the area. After this success, peace clubs were formed in Islamic schools to endure and develop the understanding of the harmony among peacebuilding and Islam. A manual was also developed to be a part of the Islamic schools’ curricula all over the country.

**Case Study 2:** Another good example may be the reduction of chances for VE through the peacebuilding approach in Northern Uganda, particularly the Karamoja sub-region, which was pierced with several intensities of conflict, inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic splits and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). Now, much of that violence has diminished as Uganda moved towards peace, overcoming the causes for VE where the role of youth was commendable, particularly a group of young people known as ‘reformed warriors’ who had given up violence in the Karamoja area of Uganda. There are cases, where young people who were, officially, agents of violence are now building peace in their communities as change makers. The ‘reformed warriors’ have been reintegrated into their communities and become ambassadors for peace, offering counter-narratives and peace messages to their communities.

**Incorporating Peacebuilding and PVE: The Way Forward**

As demonstrated by the two case studies, there are ways for linking peacebuilding approaches in PVE in order to gain positive results. However, in order to successfully incorporate the two approaches, a number of actions are necessary.

The peacebuilding community should continue its emphasis on addressing the root causes of various forms of violence, including violent extremism, and on the long-term work of transforming the relationships and social dynamics that turn violence into constructive cooperation. This can help shape strategies for PVE programmes.

Governments, donor agencies and multilateral groups should channel funds and policy priorities towards community-based peacebuilding approaches to ensure less dependence on military power. Such action will empower peacebuilders, development and local leaders with decision-making power and resources. Beside that, both PVE and peacebuilding
initiatives should focus on understanding the precise, homegrown background of any conflict and the drivers of violence. The responses of local civil society are crucial for both the analysis and the solution, involving them will facilitate to create responsiveness and alternative narratives as they are well aware of their communities. Local actors can provide insight on cultural or traditional, religious, tribal or family dynamics and enjoy more credibility in comparison to outside intervention. They are respected as they have an obligation to find enduring solutions in their own place of residence. To have convincing prospects, dynamic local forces linking extremist groups need to be understood.

In order to understand local actors, exchange of views among local communities who are directly affected by VE and the peacebuilding community, donors, governments, and development partners is a must to work actively for its prevention. Promoting reconciliation and reintegration of former extremists absolutely depend on local communities as they lead the hands-on actions to prevent and respond to extremism, hence knowing their opinion strengthens the overall PVE initiative.

In this regard, collaboration and knowledge sharing among different actors are also essential. All stakeholders, including policy makers, civil society groups, practitioners and researchers must collaborate with each other to encourage sharing of knowledge, best practices, and lessons learnt to better understand the connotations, motives, and effects of VE.

Strategies and messages of terrorist groups for recruitment are evolving with the rapid advancement of technology. Thus, the peacebuilding community needs to be aware of extremist narratives and the messaging approaches while concentrating on the root causes of extremism in all their intricacy. It is to be remembered that so long the settings that give rise to VE prevail, the intended message for peacebuilding will prevent a marginal group from being attracted to extremist propaganda.

If any PVE programme directed at a particular religion and interfaith peacebuilding practitioners or groups is engaged, few principles need to be followed to ensure that the core values and norms are preserved without conceding their integrity. As an example, the experience of the Salam Institute for Peace and Justice in Chad and Niger may be mentioned. A programme was executed by the institute to improve the
capacity of Quranic school teachers to incorporate principles of peace, diversity and nonviolence. The sensitive context was taken into account, where the participants were under constant threat from Boko Haram and allied groups who opposed any foreign non-Muslim interference in their setting. Furthermore, participating schools were relegated and neglected by their governments, lacked minimum classroom facilities and were branded as centres for VE. As the intention and motivations of the programme were highly suspected by the teachers, the utmost necessity was to create a trustworthy relation. These principles common in peacebuilding practices were applied with an assurance of empowering the Islamic school teachers, respecting their faith and providing a scope for critical thinking.

When it comes to disengagement initiatives, it should not be conducted in isolation from the community and should be part of more inclusive post-conflict agendas, having a focus on transitional justice tools like trauma healing, resolution, retaliatory and restorative justice in applicable cases to figure longstanding recuperation success. Furthermore, the requirements of the community as a whole should be considered while designing reintegration efforts, rather than just focusing on the necessities of former extremists.

In the whole PVE and peacebuilding process, authorities need to ensure that women and youth are involved from the outset in crafting and executing PVE policies and developing frameworks that allow women and youth to contribute meaningfully. In many cases, the involvement of women, continues to be underutilized and under tapped in peacebuilding and PVE. If women are empowered culturally and context-specific ways, they can be enabled as valuable players in the extremism paradigm. They can offer a distinct contribution to prevent VE. Unfortunately, there is a tendency to view women only as victims of violence, not as agents for change. Women have particular influence among youth and can play a strategic role to serve as a buffer between radical influences and those who are vulnerable to be targeted. They can assist victims of terror, participate in early warning networks and contribute to peace and security. Efforts need to be made to increase the participation of women in all levels of peacebuilding activities to involve them in decision-making at the local, regional and international level.
More focus on engaging youth positively and ensuring opportunities for the future are also important. Offering employment and improving their livings are vital to limit youth from vulnerability arising out of the economic and identity crises that are often manipulated by extremist groups. Arranging different training for youth, such as vocational training, civic education training, and promoting a more favourable environment for peace, offer a sense of meaning and freedom to young people inspiring them to be agents for building social cohesion in their own community. PVE measures can reflect the methodology of peacebuilding effort in this regard.

Again, it has been observed that formal institutions and organizations incline to be reachable to more advantaged, educated, and urban youth.\textsuperscript{26} It is to be remembered that grassroots young people are vulnerable due to lack of opportunities and dealing with this fact can be challenging. Therefore, policymakers and civil society need to build a partnership for supporting the marginalized youth.

**Conclusion**

Violent extremism is a global threat having local consequences for people and the communities that disrupts peace and security, human rights and sustainable development. Effectually retorting to the threats require preemptive initiatives that counter the process of recruiting and mobilizing followers. Through unsettled recruitment and mobilization, these efforts lessen violence, safeguard people and democratic establishments and support shared community distinctiveness. However, it has been understood by policy makers and practitioners alike that using ‘hard power’ cannot counter the threat of VE, since it draws on exclusive visions of the world which builds on false interpretations of faith, and is fuelled by intolerance.\textsuperscript{27} In this regard, it has now become very important to take a conflict-sensitive approach to confront VE. While the causes of VE are complex, requiring multi-level and multi-sectoral responses, peacebuilding and conflict transformation, alternatively, emphasize on analyzing root and proximate causes, parties and dynamics, and multi-disciplinary, multi-sectoral (or horizontal), and multi-levelled (or vertical) strategic responses.\textsuperscript{28}
As such, it is very optimistic that peacebuilding is progressively coping up with both the phenomenon of VE and the question of how to engage through practical and meaningful policy and practices to prevent VE. Peacebuilding methods are poised to make substantial contributions towards achieving this endeavour, given the long experience located within the field as compared to the relatively recent area of work defined as PVE. Disseminating the lessons and merging the knowledge of both fields can be seen as the key to avoiding impairment and making a substantial contribution.

Notes

7 Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland’s Foreign Policy Action Plan on Preventing Violent Extremism, Berne: Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, 2016, p. 6.


11 Georgia Holmer, op. cit., p. 2.


17 Peace Direct, op. cit.

18 L. Slachmijlder, op. cit.


20 Georgia Holmer, op. cit., p. 5.


23 Marisa Ensor, op. cit.

24 Mohammed Abu-Nimer, op. cit.


26 Georgia Holmer, op. cit.