

Involving Youth in Preventing Violent Extremism in North Eastern Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Radicalization into Violent extremism is a major security threat in many parts of the world. In Africa, many regions have been affected by this menace, with the Horn of Africa being the most affected. The Horn of Africa appears to be the epicenter of this malady perhaps due to its conducive environment. Though radicalization into violent extremism largely targets the youth, this age group has not been fully engaged in preventing violent extremism. Thus, this study examines how and why youth should be involved in preventing violent extremism in North Eastern Kenya. Since the study is qualitative in nature, the primary data used in this study was obtained through the in-depth semi-structured interviews. Leaders of various local NGOs, youth groups, security officials, women groups and local administrators who are versed with the subject matter were interviewed. The data was later analyzed by triangulating primary and secondary sources. The study depicts that youth ought to be involved in preventing violent extremism due to their ability to communicate and easily mobilize their fellow youth, who are principally targeted for radicalization. Youth could be meaningfully engaged by establishing youth advisory boards where they can give their views on how to prevent violent extremism. They should be involved in designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluation of programs fighting violent extremism. Involving youth in these programs is very key since they are not only a strategic population in the fight against violent extremism, but they also provide safety nets for their colleagues who recant radicalization. This study thus underlines the need to involve youth in preventing violent extremism.

Keywords: Structural/ideological drivers, Radicalization, violent extremism, youth,

INTRODUCTION

Radicalization into Violent extremism is a major security threat in the international system. This menace is severe in fragile states which lacks adequate resources and capacity to address it. The fragile states are also prone to violent extremism due to their ungoverned spaces that presents a fertile ground for breeding this malady. In Africa, the epicenter of violent extremism appears to have shifted to the Horn of Africa region where numerous terrorist groups such as Al-Qaida and Al shabaab among others have heightened their presence. This threatens to undermine the security of the entire region with far reaching ramifications including economic instability, political turmoil and widespread violence (Wilson and Krentel, 2008).

The Horn of Africa (HoA) region remains a major breeding ground for violent extremism due to the widespread misgovernance, corruption, ethnic conflicts, weak institutions and existing economic crisis. HoA is also prone to violent extremism since the region is also characterized by high levels of social inequalities, inability of some states to control their territories, unemployment especially among the youth and various political and business interests. In the last two decades, this region has become one of the major theaters of counter terrorism initiatives. This is due to the intensified terrorism activities especially after the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) began their operations (Jose, 2016).

Many incidences of terrorist attacks have been recorded in Kenya in the last two decades. This is underlined by the global terrorism database which indicates that 574 incidences of terrorism were recorded in Kenya from 2008 to 2017 (Dang, 2019). The high rate of terrorism is alleged to have been exacerbated by grievances such as political and economic marginalization, socio-cultural issues and religious beliefs. The political exclusion and

socio-economic inequalities that were promoted by sessional paper No. 10 of 1965 have had far reaching ramifications in many parts of the country, including the North Eastern region which is inhabited by Kenyan Somalis. These grievances have provided the ammunition for terrorists to recruit, creating a formidable base of supporters and sympathizers.

The increased radicalization into violent extremism has culminated in a complex security environment in Kenya. The resultant security environment in Kenya and the region has underlined the need to combat this vice. This has forced policy makers from the HoA region, Kenya included, to adopt various strategies for preventing violent extremism. These strategies include but not limited to, government working directly with religious groups, convening various gatherings with diverse stakeholders so as to understand better who ought to be engaged and in what ways, among other stratagems.

Despite the fact that youth have been mainly targeted for radicalization, this age group has not been meaningfully involved in preventing violent extremism. While extremist groups continue to target the youth due to their vulnerabilities such as their social-economic instability and identity crisis among others, the group has largely been ignored in the designing and implementation of counter violent extremism programs. This study therefore examines the role youth can and should play in preventing violent extremism in North Eastern Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

This study is largely qualitative as it involves the collection and analysis of non-numerical data that underlines the feelings, views, opinions and the insights on involving youth in preventing violent extremism (PVE). This is an appropriate approach for this study since it allows the researcher to have a deeper understanding of why and how youth should be involved in preventing violent extremism and the skill set the youth are likely to bring in PVE programs.

The study is premised on descriptive research design that is suitable when examining people's socio-economic, cultural and political dynamics. The design is also apt when examining key human characteristics such as behavior, opinion, beliefs and knowledge. Different methods of collecting secondary and primary data were used. The secondary data was obtained through the review of relevant literature including books, journals, policy briefs and government records among others. The primary data used to corroborate the secondary sources was obtained through the in-depth semi-structured interviews. Leaders of various local NGOs, youth and women groups, security officials and local administrators who are versed with the subject on preventing violent extremism were interviewed. Due to the sensitivity of the subject matter within the region, the study utilized purposive and snowballing sampling techniques to help draw a study sample size of 30 participants from the three counties of the North Eastern Region in Kenya, that is, Wajir, Mandera and Garissa. This is as shown in table 1.1.

Table 1.1. The study sample size

Target group	Sample size	Percentage
Youth leaders	9	30%
Local administrators	6	20%
Civil society/faith-based organizations	5	16.6%
Security officials	5	16.6%
Women groups	5	16.6%
Total	30	100%

Source: Research Data, 2024

The study carried out analysis by triangulating primary and secondary data. The analysis utilized a systematic thematic inductive method that culminated in various themes relevant to the study. Additionally, the purposeful

data interpretation and analysis was utilized, aligning the research findings with the objectives in order to answer the set-out study question(s).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before analyzing how and why youth should be involved in preventing violent extremism, it is important to first appreciate the prevailing environment by examining the push and pull factors that motivate people to join terrorism (Mutahi and Kabala, 2018). The residents of North Eastern region have since independence felt that they have been unfairly treated by the successive regimes. These perceptions of unfair treatment coupled with the diminished economic opportunities in the region have created favorable atmosphere for radical Islamists to propagate their violent ideas as they promise to redress such perceived injustices through violent means. This section thus begins by examining some of the structural and ideological drivers of violent extremism in the North Eastern Kenya, before delving into why and how youth could be used to prevent this menace.

Structural drivers of violent extremism in North Eastern Kenya

Violent extremist groups take advantage of numerous structural deficiencies to radicalize people. Some of these structural deficits fueling violent extremism in the North Eastern Kenya include inadequate socio-economic opportunities, inter-clan conflicts, poor governance, perceived marginalization, violations of human rights such as the right to basic education and other socio-economic and political rights enshrined in the constitution. These deficiencies have created dissent especially among the youth who are most affected. The disaffection among the youth has made them the main target of recruitment into violent extremism. Thus, prevention of violent extremism in this region must also target and involve the youth. Rather than counter terrorism strategies that underlines the use of military tactics, this region needs more efforts in preventing violent extremism, which deals with the underlying conditions that promote terrorism.

Inadequate socio-economic opportunities have been a major structural driver of violent extremism in North Eastern Kenya. These opportunities are inadequate since the region is mainly semi-arid, a condition that has compelled local residents to largely depend on livestock farming. The situation has been worsened by the effects of climate change, which has culminated in severe droughts. This has in turn led to a reduction of livestock, thus further diminishing people's socio-economic opportunities. The reduced opportunities have heightened grievances among the locals, making them vulnerable to violent extremism (Christina and Sara, 2019). The locals are vulnerable to violent extremism since extremist groups uses the hardships people face to radicalize them. The hardships could be lack of opportunities and illiteracy, that leads to illusion, dejection and later violent extremism (Interview, 2024).

Structural drivers of violent extremism led to disillusionment of many people, especially the unemployed youth. This makes them turn to violent extremism as an escape mechanism rather than a conscious choice (Interview, 2024). Those that are not recruited into violent extremism turns out to be sympathizers and supporters in one way or another. In the war against terrorism in Kenya and the region, security officers have historically abused locals, especially the Muslim youth, who are suspected of being sympathizers without sufficient evidence. Violent extremists take advantage of these historical grievances to easily radicalize the locals, especially the youth.

The high levels of unemployment in Kenya affects all regions in the country. Youth, who are over 80 percent of the Kenyan population, are the worst affected (NCPD, 2017). The situation is worse in the North Eastern region with harsh ecological conditions, making it difficult to resort to other socio-economic activities. This has increased frustrations among the youth, a condition that makes them vulnerable to radicalization into violent extremism. Despite this, youth are one of the most underrepresented groups in decision-making table of stakeholders involved in preventing violent extremism (Interview, 2024). The underrepresentation of the youth has made their voices and needs to be ignored when countering violent extremism (Mutahi, 2018).

North Eastern region has one of the highest illiteracy levels among the youth in the country. This means that the affected youth lack critical skills needed in the industry both at the county and national levels. The inadequate education coupled with high levels of unemployment in the country has culminated in widespread frustrations

among the youth in many parts of the country as it was evidenced by the anti-finance bill demonstrations of 2024. This is because the majority of the frustrated young people who have no jobs are unable to meet their basic needs (Ikejiaki, 2009). Consequently, these people display a high tendency to engage in violent behavior as espoused by the frustration-aggression theory which asserts that when people are frustrated, they are more likely to display behaviors that are aggressive in nature. This explains why the North Eastern region is a fertile ground for radicalization into violent extremism.

Another structural driver of violent extremism is marginalization, whether it is perceived or real. 60% of the respondents asserted that marginalization, whether real or perceived, is a major driver of violent extremism. People could perceive themselves to be marginalized perhaps from religious, ethnic, racial or cultural lenses. The residents of the North Eastern region view their relegation from three perspectives: from an ethnic, religious and regional angles. From an ethnic perspective, the residents of the North Eastern region, who are largely of Somali descent, have for a long time perceived themselves marginalized in employment in civil service, access to some basic services among others. Perceptions of marginalization are also evident when examined from a religious perspective where Muslim Somali are few in terms of their employment in government (Interview, 2024). Sessional paper number 10 of 1965 underscored the necessity of investing in high potential areas, thus culminating in the marginalization of an entire North Eastern region due to its semi-arid nature. All this has created a conducive environment for violent extremism since the radical extremists often promises to address the injustice.

Poor governance, violations of human rights and the rule of law has also provided a fodder for violent extremism. North Eastern region has not only experienced some level of misgovernance but also blatant abuse of human rights and the disregard of the rule of law by both security agencies and criminals. The region has similarly been targeted by repressive policies, a development that has caused a lot of frustrations among the locals. This plays a significant role in encouraging the local residents, particularly the youth, to join violent extremism. One respondent underscored this view by pointing out that misgovernance and human rights violations create an unjust environment that enables violent extremists to spread the idea that only violence can correct such injustice. This perception has justified the efficacy of violent extremism in the North Eastern region in Kenya (Interview, 2024).

Misgovernance inspires violent extremism by hindering the effective functioning of the democratic institutions, making pacific resolution of grievances difficult. An environment of poor governance makes the channels of public participation in decision and policy making unavailable, hence making it difficult to not only address, but also understand the underlying issues facing the common citizen. This culminates in leadership that is out of touch with the feelings of the majority of the residents. Such an environment allows leaders to come up with policies and decisions that rarely address the needs and the frustrations of the common man, a situation that fuels proliferation of violent extremism (Windsor, 2003).

Persistent conflicts in the North Eastern region have also served as ammunition for violent extremists. Though the entire North Eastern region is largely inhabited by the Somali ethnic group, various clans have interests that have provoked frequent inter-clan conflicts. Most of these inter-clan conflicts are due to the competition over the scarce natural resources. The dominant clans like *Ogaden* in Garissa, *Garre* and *Murule* in Mandera and the *Degodia* and *Ajuuran* in Wajir, seek to control most resources, thus provoking intermittent conflicts in the region. One local administrator observed that inter-clan hostility is largely due to the conflicts over water and grazing land for the livestock. Administrative boundaries of the devolved units have also exacerbated clan conflicts as locals compete for representation (Interview, 2024).

Lack of professionalism by the local radio stations in their reporting often aggravates clan enmity in North Eastern. The politicians often use these local radio stations to spread propaganda, fear and clan hatred, thus inciting one clan against another. Al Shabaab normally exploits the existing clan-based conflicts in the region to propagate their radical ideas that lead into violent extremism. The terrorist group frequently entice the minority clans that are often aggrieved into violent extremism by occasionally promising them employment which they are unable to get in the county and national governments (Sahgal, 2019).

The structural drivers of violent extremism, also called “Push factors” plays a fundamental role in creating

conducive environment for terrorism. These drivers examined in this section have played a central role in aggravating terrorism in the North Eastern. Consequently, this has affected the security of not only the region, but the entire country. The next section examines some of the ideological drivers of terrorism, also called “Pull factors”.

Ideological drivers of violent extremism in North Eastern Kenya

A number of ideological factors have also significantly contributed to violent extremism in North Eastern. These include but not limited to political and religious convictions. These drivers exacerbate violent extremism by provoking feelings of powerlessness, failure and inferiority which leads to a desire to prove to the alleged enemies that “we are disgruntled”. The ideological drivers in the North Eastern region combines with the structural drivers, exacerbating the already hostile environment. When people’s religious and political ideals are threatened, a sense of out-group and in-group is created. This culminates in a feeling of “us” versus “them”, creating an environment that is favorable for violent extremism (Njagi, 2018).

The presence of socio-psychological stressors ripens an environment for violent extremism. These stressors may include the innate desire for belonging, search for identity, perceived injustice and trauma due to history of violence among others. The high handedness of the security agencies in North Eastern coupled with the persistent insecurity in the area has played a significant role in triggering socio-psychological traumas among the residents, making them vulnerable to violent extremism. Insecurity posed by terrorists has worsened the trauma of residents, threatening their freedom from fear and freedom from want. The situation has been exacerbated by stakeholders in security who disregard the role the local youth could play as agents of peace (Interview, 2024).

Radical Muslim clerics from the region have regularly preached hatred, encouraging locals to kill non-Muslims for religious reasons. Since they wield a lot of influence, these clerics mislead many youths who are gullible to their teachings. This creates a favorable environment for violent extremism (Interview, 2024). The ensuing religious hostility creates a void that radical extremists exploit to radicalize the locals, particularly the youth. Religious hatred deepens when people of a particular religion seem to be controlling the politics or economy while sidelining others who are not of their religion. Terrorists exploit these perceived dichotomies and spread their narratives, hence recruiting susceptible youth into violent extremism.

Humiliation, hopelessness and lack of empowerment of locals as is the case in many parts of North Eastern regions ripen an environment for violent extremists to spread their radical ideas. This is because radical philosophies get a fertile ground when the society suffers from structural violence which culminates in humiliation, hopelessness and lack of empowerment of the locals perhaps due to inequality and corruption among other structural factors (Lord, K et al, 2009). Thus, the most appropriate security-based response to violent extremism should be preventive oriented. Preventive responses are the most appropriate to address prevailing reality and perceptions that are likely to lead to frustrations, and later violent extremism.

Borum illustrates that ideological radicalization into violent extremism is a process that has four consecutive phases. The first phase has unaddressed intense grievances. Those with these grievances view the environment not fit for their survival. In the second phase, those affected views the atmosphere as unfair. Feelings of injustice prevails among the affected group, leading to dejection. In the third phase, the affected group begins attributing their suffering to some specific actors, whether state or non-state actors. The last phase is that of distancing/devaluation. This is where the affected group views the actor causing suffering as evil. At this point, the environment is ripe for radicalization into violent extremism, particularly if the actor causing pain, is the state. This four-phased model shows that radicalization is multidimensional in nature, with a number of overlapping psychological, social and environmental triggers.

Individual backgrounds, distortion and abuse of beliefs and social networks are other key ideological drivers that creates favorable conditions for violent extremism. Individuals from the families with crisis perhaps due to health, financial, marital or other challenges are more likely to join violent extremism than those from stable families. In addition, those with associations based on family or friend, or perhaps those linked to specific religious centers or schools dominated by extremist group are more vulnerable to radicalization. 80% of the respondents observed that the misuse or abuse of religion is a main factor that fuels violent extremism in North

Eastern region. They observed that when religious beliefs have been distorted by radical clerics and extremist groups, the innocent youth often believe their message and take up arms to defend their religion with expectation of an eternal reward.

The radical narrative revolving around the need to have an Islamic government under sharia law or Islamic caliphate, the need to attain religious purity and the call to “protect” Muslims from non-Muslims are among the ideological drivers promoting radical violent extremism in the North Eastern Kenya. Violent extremists also believe that violence is an indicator of a devout religious life, therefore they inspire their audience to accept violence as a way of depicting their devotion to their god. All these ideological drivers play a crucial part in promoting radical ideas that catalyzes terrorism. Radical extremists take advantage of these acuties creating heightened levels of dissent, a development that later culminates in a ripe environment for violent extremism.

Studies in psychology depicts that individual identity plays a significant role in determining whether or not one is likely to join violent extremism. Crenshaw underlines this view by observing that one can easily fall into the trap of violent extremism when he or she is striving to find meaning for their lives (Crenshaw, 1983). Mainstream psychology further depicts that one’s identity plays a fundamental role in determining the kind of decisions one makes in life. Baumeister observes that the sense of purpose, one’s value, efficacy and self-worth determine one’s choices, including that of joining an extremist group (Baumeister, 1991). These studies depict that ideological and social drivers similarly motivate people, mainly the youth, into violent extremism.

Khalil and Zeuthen consider inadequate religious knowledge, particularly among the youth to be a major factor that motivates many of them to fall into the trap of violent extremism. They point out that when religious ignorance is coupled with harassment of locals by security agencies, high levels of dissatisfaction build among the affected community. The combination of this and other factors create an atmosphere that motivates the vulnerable youth to join violent extremism (Khalil and Zeuthen, 2014). The disgruntled and ignorant youth are willing to join terrorism, or at least are sympathetic to the course of terrorism.

The entry of Kenya Defence Forces in Somalia under the initiative of *Linda Nchi* triggered a widespread displeasure amongst the residents of the North Eastern. This is because the KDF went to Somali to fight Al-Shabaab who are considered by the residents of the North Eastern region to be their ethnic kins. The resultant discontent among the locals has provoked outright revolt, thus fueling violent extremism in the region. The displeasure among the residents of the North Eastern Kenya on the entry of KDF in Somalia confirms that many residents of the region owe more fidelity to their religious and ethnic ties than being Kenyan patriot. Thus, the entry of KDF into Somalia is interpreted by many residents as an invasion of their ethnic and religious kins. This has made it easy for extremist groups to radicalize the youth for purposes of fighting the so-called injustice meted on their ethnic kins by Kenyan government (Shauri and Wanjala, 2017).

The religious and political ideological wars have played a crucial role in fanning the embers of violent extremism. The competition for supremacy that exists between Ahl-al-Sunnah and Wahhabis that is epitomized by the Shia-Sunni dichotomy among the Muslim community is a good example. Additionally, political associations often place leadership of the Muslim community in the region in perpetual conflicts, a situation that broadens religious and political gaps that are often exploited by the radical extremists.

An understanding of the structural and ideological drivers of radicalization is crucial when seeking to prevent violent extremism. This is because a good understanding helps policy makers identify areas where even youth can be involved in preventing violent extremism. The next section thus analyzes how youth can be engaged in preventing violent extremism.

Youth in preventing violent extremism in North Eastern Kenya

Building a resilient community in the North Eastern requires engaging all stakeholders, including the youth, in programs that target prevention of violent extremism. Engaging youth in such programs enables them to bring in their strengths and skills in combating violent extremism. Youth must thus not be ignored in any aspect of national building since they form a vital age group in the society. In the security sector for instance, youth have been both perpetrators and victims of insecurity, thus the need to engage them in addressing insecurity. Youth

could particularly play a fundamental role in preventing violent extremism if their competencies is well harnessed.

Strengthening youth agencies and their assets through skills-building can be one of the main ways of harnessing the potential of the youth which is key in preventing violent extremism (Lauren and Thomas, 2023). Commitment to learning, social competencies, time management, positive values, empowerment and positive identity among other youth assets would be key in equipping the youth, thus enabling them to be involved in preventing violent extremism. The youth who are well equipped and empowered would be a great asset in this endeavor.

Youth should be given an opportunity to engage decision and policy makers, and other key leaders in numerous sectors in the North Eastern region. This should include decision and policy makers in security since youth play a key role in the prevention of violent extremism (Interview, 2024). Youth should for instance be involved in the agenda setting as far as preventing violent extremism is concerned. Having the voice of the youth when making decisions regarding the prevention of violent extremism is crucial in alleviating insecurity posed by terrorism. Listening to the youth promotes a cohesive society that provides safe spaces for the youth, and improves services that are friendly to the entire society. All these play a central role in preventing violent extremism (Njagi and Ouma, 2024).

A senior security officer observed that youth are the major actors of the clan-based conflicts present in the North Eastern region. Youth have been actors as the victims and perpetrators of these clan-based conflicts. Since they are key actors in these conflicts in the region, they are well versed with the underlying issues that trigger clan-based conflicts. Extremist groups often use the same underlying issues that provoke clan-based conflict to propagate their extremist's ideas. Thus, youth could effectively be used to prevent clan-based conflicts and violent extremism in the region. They are in a better place to promote a culture of peace and tolerance among their peers. This is because youth have many ways of mobilizing and communicating to their colleagues to a desired end. Thus, there is a need for all the stakeholders involved in preventing violent extremism to work with the youth (Interview, 2024).

Youth should not only be provided with more opportunities, but should fully be engaged in the process of decision making. Their voices must not only be heard, but should have a meaningful impact on the decision-making process, especially that on preventing violent extremism. The formation of the youth advisory board, where young people could give their input on various policies and programs pertaining to the prevention of violent extremism is an excellent way of engaging youth in decision-making. (Interview, 2024). One of the youth leaders opined that youth should be included in the designing, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of various programs combating violent extremism. Additionally, leveraging social media in discussions and as a platform for feedback is a way of engaging the youth in decision making on how to prevent violent extremism (Interview, 2024).

Though many programmes on preventing violent extremism in the North Eastern have been implemented, they are largely driven by old people. These programmes enacted by actors such as civil society organizations, international organizations, various development partners in the region and the inter-faith groups have often sidelined the youth since they are controlled by the old people (Sharamo and Mohamed, 2020). These actors develop joint programmes and bring in synergy that is fundamental in preventing violent extremism. Though these actors try to bring in the synergy needed in preventing violent extremism, youth have not been adequately represented.

Numerous organizations involved in preventing violent extremism ought to meaningfully engage the young people. This include the Civil Society Organizations, religious and community-based organizations among others who are actively involved in preventing violent extremism. The youth could play a significant role in these organizations, especially in the areas of cultural and radio programming and vocational training programmes (Kessels, et al, 2016). This is the case due to the fact that young people have the energy, skills and the creativity required in such programs.

Satisfying basic human needs is one way of preventing violent extremism. Galtung argues that wellbeing,

freedom, survival, and identity needs should be met to attain sustainable peace. Thus, freedom from want and freedom from fear are key pillars in preventing violent extremism. Addressing socio-economic, cultural and political drivers of violent extremism is key in preventing violent extremism. An examination of the structural and ideological drivers of violent extremism depicts that young people are the most affected by these drivers. Since they are the most affected, they should equally be involved in addressing these drivers.

Violent extremism in the North Eastern region is mainly fueled by religious beliefs. The misinterpretation of religious texts by the Wannabe clerics who do not have accurate information on the Islamic religion has misguided many vulnerable young people, swaying them into teachings that encourages violent extremism (Interview, 2024). Therefore, educating young people with the right Islamic doctrine would make this age group an asset in raising awareness through community engagements. The youth can also be social media activists who promote correct doctrine and at the same time exposes extremist propaganda that is often spread online. This would play a central role in preventing violent extremism in the North Eastern Kenya.

Unregulated religious practices and teachings could lead to indoctrination of youth in places of worship. Islamic practices and teachings should thus be checked to deter the youth from being radicalized into Islamic violent extremism (Shauri and Wanjala, 2017). Madrassa, largely attended by young people, is one of the key venues often used for such radicalization. Youth could therefore be involved in efficiently monitoring the activities going on in madrassas and other places of worship in the North Eastern region (Interview, 2024). Youth-led monitoring initiatives would prove more productive than the security led-initiative which is often perceived as an intrusion to the places of worship by outsiders.

With the help of the experts, youth can initiate programs that can be fused into the school curriculum to train children on dangers of violent extremism. Such programs should be introduced in a very subtle manner such as establishment of peace clubs where children learn various topics that relate to preventing violent extremism, interfaith coexistence and patriotism among others (Interview, 2024). When children are introduced to the subject of preventing violent extremism at a tender age, they can be ambassadors of peace when they become youth. Such youth could in turn influence their colleagues to denounce violent extremism due to peer pressure.

Since youth are the main target for radicalization into violent extremism, they are an asset in countering the narratives that promotes this vice. The youth understand emotions such as fear, hopelessness, and anxiety that makes their colleagues prone to violent extremism (Sinai, et al 2019). Additionally, the youth can easily notice behavioral change amongst their colleagues who have been radicalized. The proximity of the youth to their colleagues and local community give them the advantage of understanding why youth are radicalized into violent extremism, thus they are the most qualified to intervene before the radicalized commits a crime. This advantage enjoyed by the youth makes them an asset in preventing violent extremism.

Preventing violent extremism requires a safe space for dialogue. Such a space builds trust especially among different religious, linguistic or cultural groups. A safe atmosphere is also key when dealing with negative attitudes that may exist amongst diverse groups that could potentially fuel violent extremism (Subedi and Jenkins, 2016). Youth who are local residents not only have a lot of influence, but could also provide safety nets to their colleagues who denounce extremist ideas. This is because majority of those who are involved in violent extremism are the youth, thus the need to have comrades who can accommodate them if and when they renounce these ideologies. When examined from this perspective, youth could be considered a major agent of change in North Eastern region.

Youth from the local community can play a crucial role in the rehabilitation programs that target their colleagues who have denounced violent extremism. This is possible when religious leaders, local government agencies, business community, Non-Governmental Organizations among other actors partner with the local youth in their rehabilitation programs. The youth-led rehabilitation programs may underline training in psychology, religion, vocational and creative arts among others (ibid). Such a youth-led program is likely to be trusted more by those who have denounced extremism than when the same program is led by people considered outsiders. Thus, youth from the local community plays a fundamental role in enhancing the effectiveness of these rehabilitation programs.

The fluid security environment in North Eastern region underlines the efficacy of involving youth in preventing

violent extremism. Youth could be involved in sensing the early warning signs of their colleagues who are being radicalized into violent extremism. Additionally, youth are a major asset in doing any form of surveillance and even reporting all aspects of radicalization that may be going on in their localities (Interview, 2024). Engaging the local youth in surveillance and detection of the early warning signs of radicalization is likely to be more fruitful than when the same exercise is conducted by people who are not even familiar with the location.

As underlined in Kenya's National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism, youth should be involved in all the pillars of combating violent extremism. These pillars include legal and policy, psychosocial, media and online, education, arts and culture, training and capacity building among others. The flexibility of the youth makes them suitable in engaging in all these pillars. The youth have not only the aptitude and the commitment needed, but also the energy required to effectively address all these pillars of combating violent extremism.

Running a series of print, radio and television messages that counter radical ideas is crucial in preventing violent extremism. Youth could be key influencers in these social media platforms. Their activities both offline and online would influence numerous audiences and involve diverse stakeholders in preventing violent extremism. The youth's prowess in the social media platforms is vital in engaging the radicalized with the correct doctrine of Islam. The youth would use these platforms in for instance engaging the radicalized individuals on the correct interpretation of the fundamental Islamic concepts that are often abused by violent extremists (Wario, 2024).

Radicalization and peer influence through the social media have become one of the major venues where youth are radicalized into violent extremism. Thus, in preventing violent extremism, youth should be engaged in advocacy activities including creating awareness through social media. The use of influencers and bloggers in generating messages that counter radical narratives is so important in curbing radicalization into violence and terrorism (Interview, 2024).

A study respondent observed the following when asked, "What role would the youth play in preventing violent extremism?"

Youth could be engaged in creation of awareness by disseminating counter narratives on social media. They could also be engaged in community activities such as mentorship programs to children and their peers. For the returnees, the rehabilitation centers can be established in every county, but priority should be given to the most affected areas of the North Eastern region (Interview, 2024).

Addressing conditions that breeds joblessness and poverty, especially among the youth is key in preventing violent extremism. Since youth are the most affected by these conditions, it is reasonable to partner with them when designing policies that addresses these needs. Mandaville and Nozell observe that for one to effectively design and implement policies that prevent violent extremism among the youth, one needs to understand how youth are affected by this malady. (Mandaville and Nozell, 2017).

The youth need to be educated on the drivers of violent extremism. When youth identify the drivers of violent extremism, they become more equipped on the mitigation measures needed to address them. They also become more alert on the key indicators of violent extremism. This helps them to be on the look out to analyze these indicators and detect their colleagues who might be victims of radicalization so that appropriate actions can be taken before it is too late. There is also a need to develop resilience among the youth as a way of equipping them to combat violent extremism. Ambassadors among the youth could be identified and empowered to help them spread the counter violent extremism narratives to their peers (Interview, 2024).

As discussed in this section, youth can be a major asset in preventing violent extremism. However, this age group continues to play a peripheral role since they have not been fully involved in preventing violent extremism. Thus, this paper argues that there is a need for inclusive decision and policy making processes on violent extremism, where youth play a central role.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the drivers of violent extremism is key in combating this menace. This paper argues that the

drivers of violent extremism in North Eastern Kenya are classified into structural and ideological drivers. The structural drivers include inadequate socio-economic opportunities, high illiteracy levels, poor governance, perceptions of marginalization, prolonged and unresolved conflicts and high unemployment rates. Additionally, ideological drivers such as clan and religious hatred, distorted religious doctrines, individual backgrounds, and search for identity plays a key role in exacerbating the already dire situation.

The youth play a fundamental role in promoting a culture of peace and tolerance among their peers. This age group is also dynamic in terms of their various ways of communication and mobilization that targets their colleagues. They also have the aptitude, energy and the creativity needed in preventing violent extremism. The paper argues that youth can be involved in preventing violent extremism by establishing youth advisory boards where young people can give their views on various policies and programs on preventing violent extremism. They should also be involved in the designing, execution, monitoring and evaluation of programs fighting violent extremism.

Young people could also be used as social media activists to promote the right doctrine of the Islamic faith. Since they are very good in the use of social media platforms they can leverage it for discussions, decision making and even feedback on programs on violent extremism. With the help of education experts, youth can introduce programs in local schools targeting children.

This group is key in disengaging, rehabilitating and re-integrating the radicalized colleagues back to the society. They also give safety nets to their colleagues who denounce violent extremism.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper underlines the need for state and non-state actors to undertake policy reforms that institutionalizes youth engagement in combating terrorism. These policy reforms should be undertaken at local and national levels in order to ensure long-term sustainability of the programs that prevent violent extremism. Institutionalization of youth involvement in preventing violent extremism should underscore the potential of youth as agents of change, not just as victims or perpetrators in the radicalization narrative.

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