



TONY BLAIR
INSTITUTE
FOR GLOBAL
CHANGE

**VOICES FROM KENYA AND NIGERIA:
WORKING WITH RELIGIOUS ACTORS
TO PREVENT EXTREMISM**

WITH A FOREWORD BY
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Foreword

Over the past five years, the Supporting Leaders programme at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change has partnered with local organisations to empower religious actors to counter extremist narratives and build social cohesion. It trained 172 trainers and facilitators, empowered 361 religious leaders and reached more than 29,000 local community members.

In 2019 the Institute and the Alliance for Peacebuilding, with the generous support of the GHR Foundation, convened an Insights Forum in Nairobi. Our aim was to showcase to practitioners and policymakers the impact of working with religious actors to build peaceful and stable societies. More evidence on this is essential to support sustainable policy change and allocation of resources. The need for such an evidence base has become more pressing in 2020 due to the global Covid-19 pandemic, which is likely to lead to resources being diverted away from defending societies against violent extremism.

This essay collection explores challenges and opportunities for policymakers working with religious actors, giving a platform to locally grounded perspectives and priorities, fresh thinking and innovative solutions to the ever-evolving, global challenge of confronting extremism. What are policymakers neglecting? What radical changes or policies are needed? What would help equip policymakers to deal with this challenge?

In the essay “Grievance, Religion and Ideology: Working at the Interface to Counter Violent Extremism”, Nuruddeen Lemu and Haleemah Ahmad argue that, generally, ideology motivates the leadership of violent extremist groups while grievances motivate most of their fighters. Hence, both ideology and grievances must be addressed in building resilience against extremism. The authors call on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) practitioners and policymakers to find innovative solutions to continue work during the pandemic, which will also enhance P/CVE efforts in future years.

In “Faith Warriors: The Effectiveness of Inter and Intra-religious Action in Countering Violent Extremism”, Dr Hassan Khannenje emphasises the importance of intra- and inter-religious action for peacebuilding and P/CVE, exemplified by the El-Wak bus attack in 2015, when a group of Muslims stood up to protect Christians. Religious actors uniquely combine authority, credibility, institutional resources and community grounding. Clerics involved in the Horn Institute’s Deep Dialogue Programme have been successful in rescuing radicalised youth. Khannenje recommends that religious actors be part of any programmatic intervention from the design stage and that those interventions reflect unique local circumstances.

In “Gender Equality and the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Kenya: The Role of Religious Leaders”, Fauziya Ahmed argues that opportunities for women are still restricted in every country despite high-level calls for action over the past 20 years. The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic response have exacerbated structural societal inequalities. Therefore, it is critical to have more female religious teachers, alliances between religious and political leaders (coalitions for change) and an embrace of social media to reduce intergenerational gaps.

In “Empowering Local Voices: Using Community-Led Approaches to Prevent Extremism”, Tog Gang notes the erosion of traditional institutions as key to recent conflicts across the Lake Chad Basin. The transfer of powers from traditional to constitutional authorities has reduced local conflict-preventive capacities. Religious leaders have a key role to play in community mobilisation to act on nutrition, sanitation and peacebuilding, just as they are now doing in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In “Shared Spaces: Gender and Religion in Nigeria’s Programme for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration”, Habiba Dahir argues that engaging women on religion-based platforms is important in P/CVE, especially because terrorists employ a gendered construction of extremist ideologies to justify violence. Muslim women’s associations, teachers, civil society leaders, psychologists and female religious scholars have been instrumental in P/CVE activities in north-eastern Nigeria, including the community reintegration of women formerly associated with armed groups: a rare but powerful example of female-to-female deradicalisation.

In “Following the Narrative: Using Qualitative Evidence to Inform Policy to Prevent Violent Extremism”, Shamsia Ramadhan recommends qualitative results-based and community-focused monitoring and evaluation systems drawn from the peacebuilding sector to better inform P/CVE policymaking and programming. This highly participatory approach acts as a confidence-building measure to enhance local ownership, active participation and the creation of context-specific policies. P/CVE programmes need to have mid- and long-term visions that include local, regional and global dynamics.

We hope that the important material covered in these essays will better position P/CVE practitioners to make the case to policymakers as to why, and more importantly how, improvements can be made, especially during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. The opinions expressed are the authors’ and do not reflect the opinions of the Institute.

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Contributors

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Dr Usama Hasan was previously a Senior Researcher at Quilliam and a founding advisor to the organisation in 2008. As a teenager Usama became a radical salafi activist and, whilst still a Cambridge undergraduate, briefly took part (1990-1) in the 'Jihad' against Communist forces in Afghanistan. However, following the 7/7 bombings in London, Usama took it upon himself to start campaigning against extremism and for religious reform within Muslim circles.

MUHAMMAD NURUDDEN LEMU

Nuruddeen Lemu is Director of Research and Training at the Da'wah Institute of Nigeria, Islamic Education Trust in Nigeria. He develops, facilitates and conducts train-the-trainer courses in enhancing inter-faith dialogue and engagement, intra-faith cooperation, building resilience against various forms of religious extremism among Muslims, and promoting faith-based critical thinking ("Shari'ah Intelligence"). Nuruddeen is a director of several organisations including Lotus Capital (Halal Investments) Limited, the Development Initiative of West Africa, the Almajiri Child Rights Initiative and ICICE-Al-Noor Academy.

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Haleemah Oladamade Ahmad is a Senior Research Associate and Chief Editor at the Da'wah Institute of Nigeria, Islamic Education Trust in Nigeria. Haleemah has attended and facilitated workshops on peace and led train-the-trainer courses in understanding the principles and objectives of Islamic jurisprudence. These aim to enhance inter-faith dialogue, engagement and intra-faith cooperation, clarify misconceptions about Islam, and counter various forms of religious extremism. She was Co-Convener of the *Niger Youth Colloquium*, which was targeted towards the reduction of electoral violence before, during and after the 2019 Nigerian General Elections.

DR HASSAN KHANNENJE

Dr Hassan Khannenje is Director of the HORN International Institute for Strategic Studies in Nairobi, Kenya. He is an author, consultant and practitioner specialising in conflict analysis and resolution, diplomacy and foreign affairs, peace and security, terrorism and violent extremism. He advises Kenya's Ministries of Interior, Defence and Foreign Affairs, and is a consultant with various local and international media outlets, including the BBC, CGTN, SABC, Al Jazeera, ZDF and Nationmedia on issues of conflict, terrorism, security and diplomacy.

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Fauziya Abdi Ali is Founder and President of WIIS HoA and Chair of Sisters without Borders, a network of Kenyan organisations devoted to the prevention of violent extremism. Fauziya is an advocate for women's engagement in peace and security, engaged in development projects encompassing peacebuilding, women and youth programming and conflict resolution. She developed and implemented one of the first projects on countering violent extremism in East Africa, a decade ago.

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Tog Gang is National Programme Manager for Search for Common Ground. He leads on the implementation of strategic, national-level projects and provides technical support to the Nigeria programme. Previously, Tog was at the forefront of Mercy Corps' conflict management and peacebuilding work in Nigeria. He has spent the past six years reaching out to the most marginalised and conflict-affected communities, with various interventions that promote inclusiveness and fairness to all stakeholders affected by protracted crisis. He has been involved in the design and implementation of a series of successful strategic assistance projects in complex ethno-political conflicts and specialises in working with local communities by providing support in mediation, negotiation and advocacy.

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Shamsia Ramadhan is Programme Manager in the Capacity for Inter-religious Community Action project at Catholic Relief Services. She is a peace practitioner with more than 18 years of experience in the implementation of peace, security and development projects in Africa.

Grievance, Religion and Ideology

Grievance, Religion and Ideology: Working at the Interface to Counter Violent Extremism

*Muhammad Nuruddeen
Lemu and Haleemah
Oladamade Ahmad*

Introduction

There are two major, overlapping groups within the membership of the violent extremist organisation Boko Haram. Firstly, in the minority, are the extremist, religious and ideologically motivated leaders who run and sustain the organisation. Secondly, and the majority, are the basic, justice-seeking members, who view themselves as victims of security force abuses. The latter mainly join Boko Haram to avenge their lost ones and their destroyed lives. These members are the foot soldiers and the ones who usually end up in prison, in the custody of Operation Safe Corridor and internally displaced persons camps. Significantly, they are more easily accessible for interviews and research.

Studies conducted among detained Boko Haram fighters suggest that, while military counter-insurgency measures have clearly contributed to a sense of greater security in the region, abuses of power by government defence and security forces have, over the period, also added to the grievances that have led them to join Boko Haram. One study in 2017, showed that 57 per cent of former Boko Haram fighters identified “revenge” as having “a strong or being the only influence in their decision to join”. Another showed a striking 71 per cent pointed to “government action”, including “killing of a family member or friend” or “arrest of a family member or friend”, as the incident that prompted them to join.

Ideology Without Grievances Does Not Produce a Movement

These types of grievances are the foundation upon which a violent extremist ideology is built. A problem (whether real or perceived) is needed to justify the existence and importance of an ideology that can mobilise and bind people together in addressing it. The ideology is then often garbed in religious terminology to give it the halo of divine credibility. Violent extremists develop and justify novel principles and rules for interpreting scriptures that suit their ends. This religious halo grants the ideology easier acceptance by the less critical among the faithful. For the intellectual and administrative leadership of Boko Haram, **there is a clear, significant and extreme religious identity and motivation tied to their real or perceived grievances.**

Any strategy to counter this ideology and its use as a recruitment tool needs a very carefully developed and proven 'intellectual immunisation programme' that builds resilience at the community level. This needs two things. Firstly, an understanding of the unique local context. Causes, pathways, grievances and possible solutions are often best understood by members of local communities. Donors and policymakers need to recognise the need for a tremendous level of humility, curiosity, commitment and sincerity when trying to work and communicate with local actors in developing programmes to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE). Secondly, it needs the engagement of trusted and competent religious and community leaders.

Working With Religious Actors

Working with religious actors comes with challenges. One of these is the authority and credibility of religious scholars within the community. Trust is the most important currency in P/CVE. The success of P/CVE efforts is based largely on the trustworthiness of alternative narrative sources, their veracity and soundness, the distance from ulterior motives, and their independence of some 'other' (usually government/Western) authority.

The conflicting role that scholars often have to play is a challenge. The P/CVE efforts of a scholar can be undermined by a visible relationship with foreign or other donors, or participation in inter-religious bridge building, dialogue and engagement. Violent extremists and their sympathisers view governments of all types and especially 'Western' governments and NGOs with cynicism and part of a conspiracy to undermine Islam and Muslims. Any programme headed by or linked to any government will instantly lose credibility in the eyes of many community members as soon as the links are known or even suspected. Thus, the more independent of government or foreign agencies a scholar is believed to be, the more credible he (or she) is likely to be. Local scholars known also to be sometimes critical of government action or inaction are usually seen to be more credible by Boko Haram sympathisers and hence more useful in P/CVE work.

Donors also need to understand that the local religious leaders and groups who are best placed to work on P/CVE within their communities may not possess the usual skillset and qualifications required by them, such as proposal and report writing, grant management, project accounting and monitoring and evaluation. They may have to allow for an adapted approach and relationship.

Crucially, donors and religious leaders in their P/CVE efforts should not ‘dehumanise’ the extremists. Civility, courtesy and some degree of empathy in P/CVE messaging is essential to ensure not only greater safety, but that what comes from the heart of the religious actors, gets to the heart of the extremists.

Building Resilience Against Extremist Narratives

There have been a few carefully tested and evaluated strategies, undertaken by organisations in Northern Nigeria, which use a combination of traditional faith-based critical thinking tools of **Islamic jurisprudence**.¹ According to a **UNDP report** in 2017, “fostering greater understanding of religion, through methods that enable students to question and engage critically with teachings, is a key resource for PVE”. As an example, just knowing the different specialisations of various Islamic scholars helps the faithful recognise the limits of individual scholars and makes it difficult for people to blindly follow only one scholar on every issue without seeking a ‘second opinion’, particularly on important and conscience-disturbing issues such as killing innocents and suicide bombing.

¹ *Usul al-Fiqh* refers to the Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence or Islamic Legal Theory; *Qawa'id al-Fiqhiyyah* deals with Islamic legal philosophy and maxims; while *Maqasid al-Shari'ah* focuses with the higher intents, ends and purposes of Islamic law. Together these fields function to regulate juristic reasoning (*ijtihad*), the interpretations of texts and their application in various contexts. These three are combined in a course (“Shari'ah Intelligence”) developed by the Da'wah Institute of Nigeria (DIN), Islamic Education Trust, Minna, Nigeria. Available on <https://dawahinstitute.org/pve-tools/>

The tools of Islamic jurisprudence make the identification and deconstruction of extremist narratives much easier for religious actors. Because these tools are derived from already respected and accepted classical traditional (pre-modern) sources and scholars, they are not viewed as tainted by modern or Western philosophical innovations into Islamic teachings. This has ensured easy recognition, acceptance and ownership of these tools in the various communities where they have been shared in P/CVE work.

In addition to these 'faith-based critical thinking tools', is the use and sharing of more authoritative, alternative/counter religious narratives, essential literature, audio-visual material, online content, and other key learning resources. Sharing of MP3 players with relevant audio P/CVE content in local languages has been very popular among many local women who for various reasons are not able to travel or attend training programmes. Use of P/CVE content on WhatsApp has also been very popular among less literate young people since it allows audio-visual content in local languages.

This strategy also requires well-trained and credible local voices discussing in mosques and on public media (especially radio) with youth and community leaders the many individual and community grievances, and various realistic non-violent [approaches to dealing with these](#). The identification of credible local voices requires well thought-out criteria, careful consultation with various local stakeholders and a triangulation of approaches in order to get the best results.

Scaling Up

Most donors and supporters have started with small, community-focused, pilot projects with thorough monitoring, evaluation and learning in just one state in northeastern Nigeria. This is useful in ensuring that future decisions on scaling up are based on the assessment of credible, empirical data.

The results of this have been positive and shown that participants and their communities have significantly increased their levels of interfaith and intra-faith tolerance and respect for diversity of opinions of various topics related to religious interpretations.

However, there are limitations to scale. These include a lack of support for sharing these tools more widely through training and teaching methods. Another is the high cost of traditional public and social media for a region-wide programme in various languages. There can also be a lack of coordination between donors on this strategy. To help the scale up of such programmes, donor agencies need to share the results of pilot projects with each other and work with credible partners who have a history of working with local religious leaders and organisations. Scaling up requires carefully designed, context-sensitive forms of funding and support by donors in order not to undermine the local credibility of such strategies.

Covid-19 and Violent Extremism

The Covid-19 pandemic has slowed down or completely halted many P/CVE and community resilience-building programmes. Some of these programmes have been difficult to maintain due to social distancing measures and shutdowns.

The pandemic has not, however, slowed down the violence or recruitment activities of Boko Haram. Many of the various social and economic grievances that drove some to join the group have been exacerbated by the lockdowns associated with the pandemic.

The closure of places of congregational worship, of pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj and Umrah) and other social distancing measures that have affected Muslim worship and customs (such as shaking hands), have all been interpreted as attacks against the practice of Islam, and the pandemic as [a sign of God's wrath on their enemies](#). It is critical that alternative approaches are developed for local religious actors during lockdown, which respect social distancing and their contexts.

Donors should encourage and support organisations involved in P/CVE to reimagine and redesign themselves, and to build capacity through new approaches, skills and training. Valuable content could be translated into relevant languages and made available in digital formats. So long as appropriate commitment is made available, a combination of online, audio-visual content and the use of video conferencing applications, should allow for the continuation of training. Indeed, new and creative approaches can help organisations to ‘build back better’ when the pandemic has receded and lockdown restrictions are eased.

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Faith Warriors: The Effectiveness of Inter and Intra-religious Action in Countering Violent Extremism

Dr Hassan Khannenje

Introduction

That inter-religious and/or intra-religious action is the currency of peacebuilding is not new. In fact, this action has historically proven to be a viable approach to peacebuilding and conflict resolution in many societies experiencing intractable conflicts. What is new is its increasing importance in countering violent extremism in the age of jihadi terrorism. As the world grapples with the scourge of terror, the limits of hard power and other state-centric approaches in confronting terrorism and violent extremism have become apparent, as evidenced by the blowback caused by the extrajudicial killings of radical clerics in Kenya who radicalised their followers to the extent that their two Mosques (Musa and Sakina) were taken over by radical youth.

Such (state-centric) limitations are true in Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere. As such, nations are leaning on more organic, traditional if not somewhat religio-indigenous processes and institutions for conflict resolution. Key among these are religious institutions. On a continent that is 'notoriously religious', religion plays a fundamental role in shaping people's world views, informing their actions and defining the parameters of their epistemology. Christianity and Islam, while fairly recent in Sub-Saharan Africa, have come to dominate the ontological space of many Africans, making them both tools of exploitation by conflict and terrorist profiteers, as well as avenues for intervention by peacemakers.

In Kenya, religious actors are largely credited with many democratic achievements—as umpires in competitive elections, champions of the human rights agenda and as a vital part of the peace sector, with deep roots and experience merging relief, development and peacebuilding.

Increasingly, they have become instrumental in the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) because of their unique position of authority, credibility, institutional resources and ties to local communities. Inversely, these attributes have also been exploited by radical and extremist groups to radicalise and recruit young people into violent extremist outfits such as the Al Qaida affiliate, *al Shabaab*.

Why Inter and Intra-religious Actions Matter

Denial of Extremist Leadership Legitimacy

In the wake of leadership ‘chaos’ in the Muslim world, extremists exploit the apparent ‘vacuum’ to claim representation of the interests of the ‘persecuted’ Muslim *Umma*, locally and globally. Such claims to leadership are not new, nor are they necessarily negative aspirations. What is disturbing is the politicisation of Islam and romanticisation of the medieval Islamic caliphates which are fuelling a renewed desire for a utopian caliphate as a panacea to the current Muslim predicament. This can only be challenged by credible religious/Islamic leadership, equipped to counter such distorted notions and provide positive alternatives to this utopia. A case in point in Kenya is the two charismatic preachers from Mombasa, Sheikhs Makaburi and Rogo, who appropriated their positions to radicalise youth into extremism. On the other hand, Sheikhs involved in [BRAVE’S Deep Dialogue programme](#)² have been successful in rescuing radicalised youth, as captured in the following testimonial: *“I have always yearned to be a mujahid...I was trained in shooting in preparation for Jihad...and I convinced up to twelve of my friends to join extremist groups...BRAVE trainings and meetings brought me back to my senses.”*

² Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism (BRAVE).
<http://csrccenter.org/brave-programme>

Demystifying Differences

Extremists seek to exploit perceived religious differences by driving a wedge between faiths, as evidenced by selective attacks against non-Muslims in northern Kenya. Through joint interfaith action however, religious actors have served to demystify the often false narrative of irreconcilable differences by demonstrating peaceful coexistence. This has led to increased willingness of the predominantly Muslim locals to defend their non-Muslim counterparts. This includes extreme cases of terrorist attacks such as the El-Wak bus attack in December 2015, when a group of Muslims stood up to protect Christians, further underscoring the importance of interfaith action.

Ideological Pushbacks

One of the most effective propaganda tools for terrorist recruitment and resource mobilisation has been the smart, albeit distorted, deployment of religious narratives. In the Horn of Africa, *al Shabaab* uses a constellation of 'religious' narratives to advance their cause. For instance, it expropriates the metanarrative of loyalty and disavowal (*al wala wa'l bara*), implying loving or hating for the sake of God (Allah). In effect, *al Shabaab* skillfully creates parallels with the many battles that early Muslims fought with idol worshipers in Mecca and Medina during the time of Prophet Mohammad. To an untrained ear not grounded in early Islamic history, this can be very persuasive. However, for Kenya's BRAVE Deep Dialogue programme, religious-led, ideological pushbacks have been critical in countering such propaganda. This programme has partly contributed to the national CVE strategy as well as County Action Plans in several hot-spot counties.

Supporting Leaders Programme

It is against this background that a recently completed pilot project, the Supporting Leaders programme in Kenya, initiated by the Tony Blair Institute, was an important step in attempting to deploy inter and intra-religious action in countering violent extremism. Co-designed and implemented by a local consortium of P/CVE organisations, the year-long project developed modules to empower emerging religious leaders with critical skills and competencies and the creation of joint action plans for effective P/CVE campaigns. The pilot project culminated in an Insights Forum in Nairobi, Kenya, in late 2019, and laid a foundation for further inter and intra-faith action in P/CVE in the region.

Conclusion: Closing Policy Gaps

Sustained Support

Prioritisation of state-centric, rational and positivist approaches and theories of change has often ignored the societal peculiarities that define ways of life in communities. In the case of Kenya, it is the under-appreciation and under-deployment of religious actors in P/CVE. Even in cases where such need is recognised, official policy commitment is often lacking, making funding unreliable, episodic and unsustainable. This calls for a paradigm shift with an eye to long-term programming that is not hostage to unpredictable funding cycles.

Gendering Religious Action

Our experience has demonstrated that the involvement of women opens up opportunities for greater participation and impact in the P/CVE space, especially in light of the increasing role of women and girls, both as perpetrators and enablers of terrorism, as well as CVE champions. Indeed, the unique agency of women and girls in the jihadi industry in the region should place them at the centre of any effective P/CVE strategy. In a highly patriarchal society, however, strategic deployment of traditional male religious leaders serving as ‘gate keepers’ would greatly enhance the likelihood of overall success.

Local Input in Programming

The unique knowledge and community support for religious actors make them indispensable parties in the design and implementation of P/CVE programmes. As such, these actors must be part of any effective intervention from the design stage, as evidenced by the Supporting Leaders programme. Any official policy must adopt this approach as a matter of practical necessity. Evidence suggests that high levels of theories of change do not adequately reflect local dynamics and complexities.

Dr Hassan Khannenje,
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*Gender Equality and the Prevention
of Violent Extremism in Kenya*

Gender Equality and the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Kenya: The Role of Religious Leaders

Fauziya Abdi Ali

Introduction

It has been two decades since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, the global policy framework for the rights of women. However, despite legislative, social and economic gains for women, no country, including Kenya, provides the same opportunities to its girls and women as it does to its boys and men.

As the world tackles the Covid-19 pandemic, the economic and social impacts of the containment response have exacerbated and laid bare the structural inequalities present within our societies. During the first month of the containment measures in Kenya, the Ministry of Gender reported a rise of 42 per cent in cases of gender-based violence (GBV). According to a recent study undertaken by Cenfri, women's income has been disproportionately affected, with 50 per cent of women, compared to 40 per cent of men, not earning during the first seven days of May 2020, further increasing their vulnerability.

If there was ever a time to prioritise gender equality, it is now!

As Kenya works to curb the pandemic, it still faces the challenge of violent extremism. Like many countries, Kenya has been struggling to curb terrorism. As part of efforts to consolidate initiatives aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), a national strategy to counter violent extremism (NSCVE) was adopted in 2016. This has been devolved to the 47 counties, with each county developing a specific county action plan (CAP).

Each CAP, which is designed to support the national P/CVE efforts at the local level, is made up of pillars intended to address issues specific to the area. Pillars cover themes such as education, access to justice, faith and ideology, politics, security, arts and culture.

When the NSCVE was first adopted, it was criticised for not taking a gender-sensitive approach. Gender was not mainstreamed across the pillars and it did not incorporate a specific gender pillar. However, based on county engagements, the proposed revised NSCVE now includes a gender pillar which recognises the importance of gender equity and equality in tackling violent extremism.

The introduction of a gender pillar, though applauded, must be implemented with care. The CAPs must also ensure that there is gender analysis, sensitivity and mainstreaming across all the pillars. Simply including words such as 'gender' and 'women' is not enough. The CAPs must define how gender perspectives will be incorporated. If women are to be engaged, what does that mean? How does implementation of the action plan affect both men and women? How will each pillar ensure gender equality? How will data be collected?

These discussions must take place at the county level during design, review and implementation. They will require genuine community engagement and buy in in order to be successful. Gender sensitivity will help in understanding the impact of the policies being established at the county level and the differing effects they might have on men and women. Mainstreaming of this nature will ensure each pillar meets the needs of all stakeholders.

Gender and Faith

One key pillar which desperately needs a gender-sensitive approach is the faith-based pillar. In Kenyan society, religion exerts a tremendous influence on a person's beliefs, identity and behaviour. For a long time, extremist ideologies and movements have instrumentalised religion to discriminate against and oppress women, and rigidly define men's roles. Despite many religious institutions being known for their social and humanitarian assistance, they have often performed poorly in challenging patriarchal structures and beliefs that have propagated inequality and discrimination against women and girls.

Therefore, as Kenya makes strides to promote gender equality and equity for the prevention of violent extremism, it is critical that religious leaders and faith-based institutions are engaged in supporting and advocating for gender equality.

Promoting Advocacy

When religious leaders fail to adequately challenge the social and economic structures that foster gender inequality, they allow violent extremist organisations to capitalise on these inequalities and further entrench their ideologies. Instead, these religious leaders could call for the provision of livelihood activities, bursaries and other support for women, especially those in informal settlements and rural areas, as part of empowerment projects and efforts to reduce the inequality gap.

An alliance between religious and political leaders can help strengthen and expand advocacy efforts to improve gender equality and enhance policy and legislation that promote it. This also provides an additional advantage as it links to another pillar—the political pillar—to further coordinate efforts on the prevention of extremist violence in the country.

Female Religious Teachers

Despite the engagement of women in their religious communities, religious leaders and those who interpret religious doctrine are still predominately men. Many religious leaders have not fully grasped the impact of gender inequality and its implications on communities. One such implication is that women who are excluded and have insufficient knowledge about their religion can be particularly susceptible to radical ideology. Having female religious teachers can encourage women to ask questions that they may not have felt comfortable asking a male religious teacher, creating an environment that is more conducive to learning.

However, while female religious leaders can play critical roles in P/CVE, doing so comes with risks. They risk being instrumentalised as security agents or as victims, which in turn can lead to their safety being compromised. In communities with a strong sense of patriarchy, women face higher risks of reprisal if they are perceived as challenging gender expectations when taking on public roles, and especially when claiming positions of religious authority.

As the CAPs are used as tools for engagement at the local level, female religious leaders must be free to engage in P/CVE efforts in self-determined ways, building on the context in which they operate. Their experiences, community knowledge and inputs must then also be incorporated to ensure inclusivity and knowledge sharing, and to prevent these unintended adverse effects.

Embracing Social Media to Connect with Young People

Religious leaders have generally been slow to embrace technology for advocacy and sensitisation activities which, given their unique position and influence within the community, has been a significant missed opportunity. However, due to the new social distancing measures, most activities which have focused on community engagements are now using technology for discussions promoting peace, plurality and P/CVE. In addition, violent extremist groups have taken advantage of online platforms to spread ideology to attract recruits using moral and psychological inducements. With Covid-19 turning more people to the internet for information, the rise of misinformation has created concerns regarding elevating online radicalisation.

The change in practice provides an opportunity to use technology more regularly and successfully. Technology can provide an avenue to bring religious leaders closer to the young population through sharing of informative videos and messages. They can work with young religious scholars and advocates of gender equality to generate social media content to connect with and influence young people.

Female religious leaders often take on both official and unofficial roles as mentors and teachers to younger children in schools, religious institutions and as mothers which suggests that, given the right tools and training, they may already be well placed to utilise this new way of working.

Coalitions for Change

Religious leaders have been powerful agents of social change due to their well-resourced and large social networks. These networks can be mobilised to disseminate the work of faith leaders who are challenging patriarchal norms and ideologies and generate interpretations of religious beliefs that support equality. Working with women's groups and human rights organisations from different parts of Kenya, religious leaders can build their networks to share experiences and find ways to further enhance policy for gender equality. These coalitions should encourage female religious leaders to share their experiences and become role models for young girls and encourage them to pursue religious education for the prevention of violent extremism.

Many religious networks transcend different sectors and have a large sway in society. In Kenya, religious leaders have raised awareness on violence prevention, provided survivors of GBV with counseling and legal assistance, provided health services in communities, and supported the elimination of female genital mutilation. In the same way, religious leaders and institutions can be called upon to advocate for gender to be a fundamental component of the national strategy to prevent violent extremism in Kenya.

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Empowering Local Voices: Using Community-Led Approaches to Prevent Violent Extremism

Tog Gang

Introduction

Across the globe, violent extremism is manifested in many different forms. However, there are countless more examples of societies living harmoniously together, united by a common will to prevent and preserve their existence through collective action. How we respond to the voices of discontent and demand arising from diverse socio-economic and ideological contexts, requires specific responses and the most appropriate channels of communication. In some of these contexts, religious leaders can provide a unique and valuable channel to reach communities' most disadvantaged and often neglected individuals.

Countering and preventing violent extremism is daunting. States and policymakers often struggle to engage with their citizens effectively to address the myriad social and economic issues they face. Working with religious leaders, who possess the skills and moral influence to understand and reach many people, can provide essential access to the nucleus of communities and families. Religious leaders can be an important conduit for communication for social change and transformation.

Religious action can be used as a powerful force for good, capable of bringing diverse voices together. An interface between the communities and policymakers through religious leaders can provide an avenue for self-reflection, and also a mirror for people's frustrations and failures in policy to address these frustrations.

Challenges and Opportunities

Sustained hardships feed into protracted conflict, along with community injustices, marginalisation and exclusion, and these are often used to justify participation in extremist violence. Preventive action should view violence as a symptom to be addressed, rather than a driving cause. Progress depends on addressing the root causes of this violence. Communities will consider the option of violence when their passionate voices on the challenges they face in their societies and their frustrations towards the authorities (because of their actions or inaction) are not heard.

Approaches to counter and prevent violent extremism (P/CVE) have often been based on flawed radicalisation theories that routinely flag innocent behaviour. This is true in instances where ‘usual suspects’ like young people are targeted and victimised by their communities and government forces, in the name of preventive action against extremist violence. The UN Secretary-General’s 2016 [Plan of Action](#) calls on governments to develop National Action Plans (NAP) to address this. This is laudable in its conceptualisation, however, blanket implementation does little to dispel community perceptions or concerns that these policies are being used as mechanisms for profiling, discrimination and corruption. NAPs are often geared towards preventing people from becoming violent as a result of injustices, with insufficient political will or capability to actually address the injustices driving this violence in the first place.

When community members, particularly parents, are concerned about young people becoming threatened and/or radicalised, they can be reluctant and apprehensive about engaging with the state-supported referral systems. Religious leaders can help fill this void. Religious and community leaders have been known to be a conduit for speaking to and educating families on the personal challenges they face with parenting. They can also help to educate communities on the stigmatisation that usually accompanies the journey of seeking help. Supporting religious leaders so that they can have these conversations with at-risk community members can be an effective way to develop appropriate ethical P/CVE frameworks.

When it comes to destigmatising the issue of wanting or needing to seek help, as well as having the resources and ability to access advice and services, policy responses can also look to community approaches to public health issues like polio and HIV. Religious leaders can implant the qualities and virtues which support community development and encourage community conversations and understanding. As with confession, they can help to develop safe spaces for sharing grievances and concerns, providing a forum for the expression of individual identity and relational needs which, if left untended, can push one to participate in extremist violence.

Communities need to define what the threat of violent extremism means and looks like to them, because it will always differ based on geography and demography.

Communities should be empowered to tell impactful stories of what works and what is applicable in their communities. Similar examples like the [Daughters of Chibok](#) and [National Geographic](#) which talk about personal stories of the missing Chibok school girls, emphasise the need for action. Communities that experience this violence first hand can describe the practical challenges and ordeals they face living through the conflict.

Communities should be allowed to play a driving role in defining what the specific threats are and how to address them. Community approaches to P/CVE cannot be reduced to a single issue or intervention but should be approached as a collaborative process. It requires a whole society approach in its design and implementation, with state-supported financing and policy frameworks to support this process. This will help to determine what success looks like from a contextual level. Resilient communities exist where all individual and groups feel a sense of belonging, and have a meaningful voice and communal social bonds at all levels of the society.

Religious leaders can draw on the basic principles of community mobilisation for joint action within their contexts. There are many examples of religious communities being mobilised in difficult times to support community initiatives and programmes on nutrition, sanitation and peacebuilding, to mention but a few. We are currently witnessing examples of religious action and collaboration in tackling the [Covid-19 pandemic](#).

The World Leadership Alliance: Club de Madrid [recommends](#) creating profiles of Nigerian religious leaders and places of worship which promote radicalised messages, along with where and why this is happening. Conversely, profiles should be created of religious communities and their leaders who are championing counter-narratives to recognise their contributions to this quest for peace.

Findings from a 2016 [study](#) by Mercy Corps in Northern Nigeria revealed, “Communities perceive their religious leaders as ‘close’ to community members, possessing high social capital, and frequently playing more than one leadership role in the community.” Policymakers can capitalise on this by facilitating conversations and catalysing continued community engagement, while the religious leaders convene and promote this multidisciplinary comprehensive approach to P/CVE. Successful leadership in the prevention of violence should be built on our ability to listen, understand the issues and help. Intervention should only come after really listening to the concerns of the people in the local community who are closest to the action. This will ensure security of life and property.

Tog Gang, National Programme Manager,
Search for Common Ground

Shared Spaces

Shared Spaces: Gender and Religion in Nigeria's Programme for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration

Habiba Dahir

Introduction

Religious and traditional leaders are held in high esteem in Nigerian society, especially in the northeast region. Religious institutions that promote tolerance are essential allies in efforts to counter and prevent violent extremism (P/CVE) and, over the years, have been engaged by the government in interfaith dialogue, counter-narratives and reintegration.

Engaging women in these religion-based platforms is important in countering violent extremism in communities, especially when Boko Haram uses a gendered construction of religious extremism to justify violence and the instrumentalisation of women's bodies for operational roles. This is evident in the deployment of women as war-front sex slaves, human shields and suicide bombers. While some women have suffered untimely widowhood or lost children as a result of the Boko Haram onslaught, *others have suffered death, forced abduction, and allied assaults on the main and side lines of the insurgency.*

In northeast Nigeria, there is a gradual psychological shift in how women view themselves. They are demanding more fairness and access to decision making, especially in peacebuilding. With the significant loss of men, many of whom were husbands and breadwinners, the consequence of the insurgency has led to a large increase in the number of female and child-headed households in a region where women and children often lack the capacity, support and resources to participate in social and economic life. Conversely, women are increasingly demanding access to spaces that were previously beyond reach and occupied exclusively by their male counterparts.

Women-based religious organisations such as the Federation of Muslim Women's Association (FOMWAN) have been instrumental in northeastern Nigeria, engaging in activities to prevent violent extremism. These include the reintegration of women formerly associated with armed groups in the community. FOMWAN, as one of the largest Muslims women's groups in Nigeria, has been strategic in amplifying women's voices. It is instrumental in the development of Islamic education and awareness among women, providing them with an opportunity to express an Islamic perspective on gender issues and provide societal and religious awareness at the family and community level. While such organisations have enabled access to Islamic education for women, the space for women does not go beyond the narrow conception of their role within the family. While women demand more access, they do not have an equal voice and are only used to provide intelligence (of what goes on in the community) and are shut out from decision making.

The changing gender dynamic in the northeast region has resulted in women playing an increasingly profound role and it has exposed the need for them to be equipped to understand and communicate a constructive interpretation of their faith. FOMWAN has combined propagation of Islam with attempts to improve the socio-economic status of women, youth and children through training, education, health and humanitarian services, micro-enterprise and advocacy. Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative has been active against sexual and gender-based violence, female genital mutilation and child marriage, and played a major part in the successful defence of two young women condemned to death under Sharia in the early 2000s.

More recently, it has sought to engage imams in preaching on the rights of women and involvement in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes of former members of extremist groups in Borno state in Nigeria.

Gender, Deradicalisation and Reintegration

Since 2015, the Nigerian government has been grappling with a growing influx of returnees from Boko Haram. This has led to great pressure on already scarce resources. Thousands have fled the group or been captured or rescued by the army and are currently undergoing the process of deradicalisation in line with the government's DDR programme, Operation Safe Corridor.

In the case of Boko Haram, there is a large population of former female members or rescued victims who are returning from the conflict, and rehabilitation programmes face challenges related to gender. In the past, deradicalisation programmes have been framed mostly for men and there have been few efforts to create programmes tailored for women returning from extremist groups. It is important to note that women returning from extremist groups like Boko Haram often come back with small children or pregnant, and communities that may be willing to take back returnees are often wary about accepting their children. There are few viable alternatives given to rehabilitate returning women, and as a result, many are forced to return to the extremist organisations they left to ensure their survival and that of their children.

In response, the Nigerian government has developed its deradicalisation programme to include a greater engagement of religious actors. These individuals provide alternative narratives and interpretation that rebut the extremist propaganda of Boko Haram and other extremist factions' ideologies that exploit and draw upon religious values for recruitment and justification of their cause. However, most of these programmes exclude female religious scholars and miss an opportunity to engage increasing numbers of women returnees. The deradicalisation programme solely relies on the voices and perspectives of male preachers and misses issues relating to gender. Deradicalisation programmes have to reframe their narrative and address the gendered context used to recruit men and women.

The Nigerian, state-run rehabilitation programme is also heavily focused on the needs of men formerly associated with the movement and misses the special needs of women. The perception and view of women formerly associated with the Boko Haram is distorted. Most are seen as victims lacking any agency. This significantly hinders the effectiveness of DDR programmes. The experiences, circumstances and needs of women and girl returnees are complex. For example, some were abducted, while some joined voluntarily.

Nigerian authorities are already branding the DDR programme as an achievement, despite the challenges women and children face in the reintegration process. While men experience greater hostility, women tend to face suspicion and rejection by communities and even families. For instance, the former wife of a Boko Haram member was relocated in the Bama IDP camp and she claimed that because of stigma she was excluded from the women's socio-economic networks that could have sustained her.

Opportunities for Women to Facilitate Social Reintegration

Although shared space has provided an opportunity for engagement, women remain sidelined and excluded from key decision making, especially in the early stages of the DDR programme in Nigeria. Even at the local level, organisations implementing P/CVE programmes have to negotiate space for women in dialogue programmes. This is because women in this region are largely absent from both government and religious/traditional decision-making structures and so the presence and voices of women are relegated to the margins.

Nonetheless, organisations like the Neem Foundation have provided home-grown solutions to the insurgency in the northeast. Through a series of a small, integrated approaches, the organisation is contributing to dialogue and mediation processes. They are working closely with religious and traditional leaders to provide exclusive dialogue sessions for women through several programmes that deliberate on issues of rehabilitation, reinsertion and reintegration of former fighters. They have also designed a vulnerability measure that assesses the risk of turning to violent extremism. The scale measures behaviour, ideology, attitude, social protective factors, economic factors, history, identity, capability, affect and cognitive style, irrespective of gender. This scale helps ascertain level of risk of returnees regardless of the role an individual played in the group and serves as a guide for programming. This can also be used by government in centres where Boko Haram suspects are held. Assessing the risk level can help to determine how and when they should be reintegrated into society.³

³ *Countering Violent Extremism in Nigeria: Rehabilitation and Reintegration*
– Public Lecture delivered by Dr. Fatima Akilu

It is important to note that there remains a need to engage men to fundamentally change attitudes towards female participation and inclusion in social integration.

Policy Recommendations

- Women living in the affected communities play an essential role in determining the successes or failure of reintegration programmes. Women's organisations and networks need to play an active role in mobilising support for the DDR process by supporting ex-combatants' reintegration, reconciliation work and dialogue, and working to reduce stigma.
- Religious actors have a central role in providing counter-narratives. Community leaders, traditional authorities and women's groups should be involved in sensitisation campaigns targeting receiving communities. They need to design and disseminate positive religious messaging. Parents should be encouraged to be more involved in shaping the attitudes of their children towards non-violence.
- The capacity of key stakeholders, including women, traditional and youth leaders in the community needs to be enhanced so that they can fully engage in the design and implementation of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes. This will help in addressing sexual and gender-based violence, livelihoods issues and interfaith dialogue.
- Women religious scholars and counselors should be engaged to provide education and mentoring of women and girl returnees.

Conclusion

Successfully addressing the policy challenges of the DDR programme in Nigeria requires a recognition of changing gender norms and the diversity of experiences and needs of returnees, especially women and children. Policies and programmes need to be tailored based on their context, needs and experiences.

Women also offer meaningful counter-narratives in their local communities and play a crucial role in determining the acceptance of former members of Boko Haram. Female religious leaders, teachers, civil society leaders, psychologists and others can serve as gatekeepers, to facilitate who is welcomed into or back into communities. Buy in from women can facilitate successful reintegration. There is an urgent need to support religious networks and build bridges that allow women to contribute in the prevention of violent extremism in the country.

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Following the Narrative

Following the Narrative: Using Qualitative Evidence to Inform Policy to Prevent Violent Extremism

Shamsia Ramadhan

Introduction

As a fast-developing field, preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) poses challenges to policymakers and programme managers. Almost all P/CVE interventions recognise the importance of engaging with religious leaders. But how do they know if interventions are having an impact? How do they best capture, perceive and explain changes that are taking place, often in varied and highly fragile contexts? Capturing changes of this nature requires vigorous monitoring and evaluation methodologies that assess change in behaviour and attitudes, so that they can generate evidence-informed policies and practices.

According to recent research, P/CVE programmes fall under three broad categories: prevention that focuses on groups at risk of joining violent extremism; disengagement initiatives that provide incentives to individuals to abandon violent groups; and deradicalisation programmes that aim to change violent ideology among individuals and groups.

For policymakers, evidence is essential because it enables strategic decision making. P/CVE policymakers **require empirical evidence of the effectiveness, efficiency and value for money of interventions** to guide short and long-term planning and the allocation of resources. So far, however, indicators of success and measures of P/CVE effectiveness remain elusive given the complex nature of extremism. Thus, a general question for P/CVE monitoring and evaluation for implementers and policymakers is – how do we know if P/CVE targeted activities are influencing change as outlined in the programme or project objectives?

Understanding the P/CVE Context and Monitoring and Evaluation

Many P/CVE initiatives take place in complex socio-political environments where conflict and under-development go hand in hand. Experience has shown that, in most cases, the consequences of underdevelopment, such as unemployment and other associated grievances, can lead to cases of radicalisation among young people. These overlapping issues can intensify the violence and have devastating effects on the fabric of local communities. In most cases, P/CVE and other related interventions, including peacebuilding and development projects, target the same individuals. Thus, engaging in monitoring and evaluation in this context requires multi-agency collaboration bringing together local agencies already engaging with a cross section of community actors and religious leaders. It also requires an appreciation of the complexity of P/CVE interventions, what they intend to achieve and the inclusion of that understanding in developing a robust monitoring and evaluation system.

So how best does a P/CVE programme monitor and evaluate its activities to ensure that it captures outcomes and lessons that help us to understand the drivers of violent extremism? Since P/CVE activities aim to address violent extremism by altering behaviour, this essay argues that a qualitative, results-based and community-focused monitoring and evaluation system helps to better inform P/CVE policymaking and programming and makes recommendations accordingly. It also looks at the lessons that can be drawn from peacebuilding programmes that have for long struggled with how best to attribute change to their activities.

Monitoring and Evaluation Challenges: Experiences from Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding and P/CVE projects have many similarities, but also some key differences. The former focus on understanding the causes and processes of conflict escalation and the means to de-escalate conflict, the latter involves understanding the causes and possible effects of radicalisation to determine the best interventions within specific contexts. However, both peacebuilding and P/CVE initiatives focus on changes in the attitude and behaviour of individuals, a delicate psychosocial process that requires patience and understanding from the implementor and interest and willingness to collaborate for mutually beneficial results from all beneficiaries. This process relies on qualitative data that can provide real-life evidence and narratives that are used to help develop interventions. So, what lessons can P/CVE programmes derive from the peacebuilding sector?

Like peacebuilding, P/CVE programming involves activities at the community level that address the drivers and causes of community unrest. It is at this level that violent extremism manifests. For instance, socio-economic factors such as inequality and injustices (whether imagined or real) that often drive recruitment to extremist groups are present at the community level. Addressing these issues requires P/CVE programmes to move from interventions that are based primarily on global and regional security concerns to integrated approaches that address the drivers of violent extremism. It requires the engagement of communities and religious leaders through local organisations to develop innovative projects that respond to contextual realities based on evidence.

In peacebuilding, this process begins with a participatory conflict assessment using simple tools that engage the community in identifying the problem and exploring solutions together. However, for P/CVE, the sensitivity of the issue also requires trust-building efforts that guarantee the participation of relevant and credible religious and community leaders from the start of the process. These individuals can help to improve the programme by contributing to the development of community-based indicators that would genuinely show where change has occurred in terms of attitudes and behaviour. This participatory approach in the long run also acts as a confidence-building measure as it enhances local ownership and sustainability of impact.

In addition to making the process participatory from inception, the monitoring and evaluation of peacebuilding programmes relies heavily on having statistically significant sample sizes to address accuracy and effectiveness. Numbers and figures are a good indication of scale, but they fail to capture details about the change process. An understanding of the change process and the drivers of radicalisation, in particular, is essential in order to set policy for, and design and deliver effective P/CVE interventions. To inform policy and programmatic decision making, it is necessary to capture the change in terms of observable trends and dynamics, both positive and negative, that present an opportunity to understand the challenges better and help to address violent extremism in communities.

Accountability ensures the effective and efficient use of resources while learning is essential for organisations to help them improve programming.

Various approaches can be adopted for monitoring and evaluation, depending on who needs what data and for what purpose. Like peacebuilding, the use of evaluation of a P/CVE programme should include a combination of the following:

1. An assessment of overall programme effectiveness and value for money to support policy and programme decision making
2. Identification of lessons learned to improve the programme (and to inform replication)
3. Accountability to demonstrate that resources are well managed and efficiently attain desired results
4. Routine monitoring and reporting to manage the programme activities and identify any problems as early as possible
5. Programme development to allow adaptation in a complex and dynamic situation
6. Knowledge generation to enhance general understanding of the complex nature of P/CVE and identify generic principles that guide the effectiveness of any particular programme or approach

The monitoring approach that a P/CVE programme adopts needs to consider how the data will be used. In a growing field that is highly contextualised and personalised, a monitoring and evaluation system needs to collect data that can help improve understanding of the phenomena and factors driving it.

To complement quantitative data that provides evidence of value for money, requires qualitative data may be relied upon to explain the community experience and help one derive meaning from the statistical information presented. This can be done through narratives that highlight the social, economic, political and environmental factors that go beyond numbers and statistics.

Conclusion

The fact that P/CVE is developing so rapidly presents an opportunity to explore how the field can draw on lessons from related disciplines such as peacebuilding. The highly participatory approach with local communities and religious leaders to the design and impact assessment of peacebuilding programmes should be adapted to capture the qualitative data necessary to understand the process of change at the local level and the process of radicalisation. To achieve this requires creative thinking on policy options for P/CVE that relies on empirical evidence. It is therefore recommended that:

- Policymakers should engage with institutions, both religious and civic, and communities as key participants in the policy formulation process and not merely as beneficiaries. This approach establishes not only collaboration and trust between P/CVE actors and the communities, but enables the creation of context-specific policies.

- P/CVE programmes should have clearly defined medium and long-term visions that include local, regional and global dynamics. Regular assessments adopting qualitative approaches are critical to capturing incremental changes taking place in the community towards longer-term goals.
- Policymakers should work together with local organisations to co-design and develop monitoring and evaluation tools that will effectively capture evidence for policymaking in situations that are fast changing and complex.

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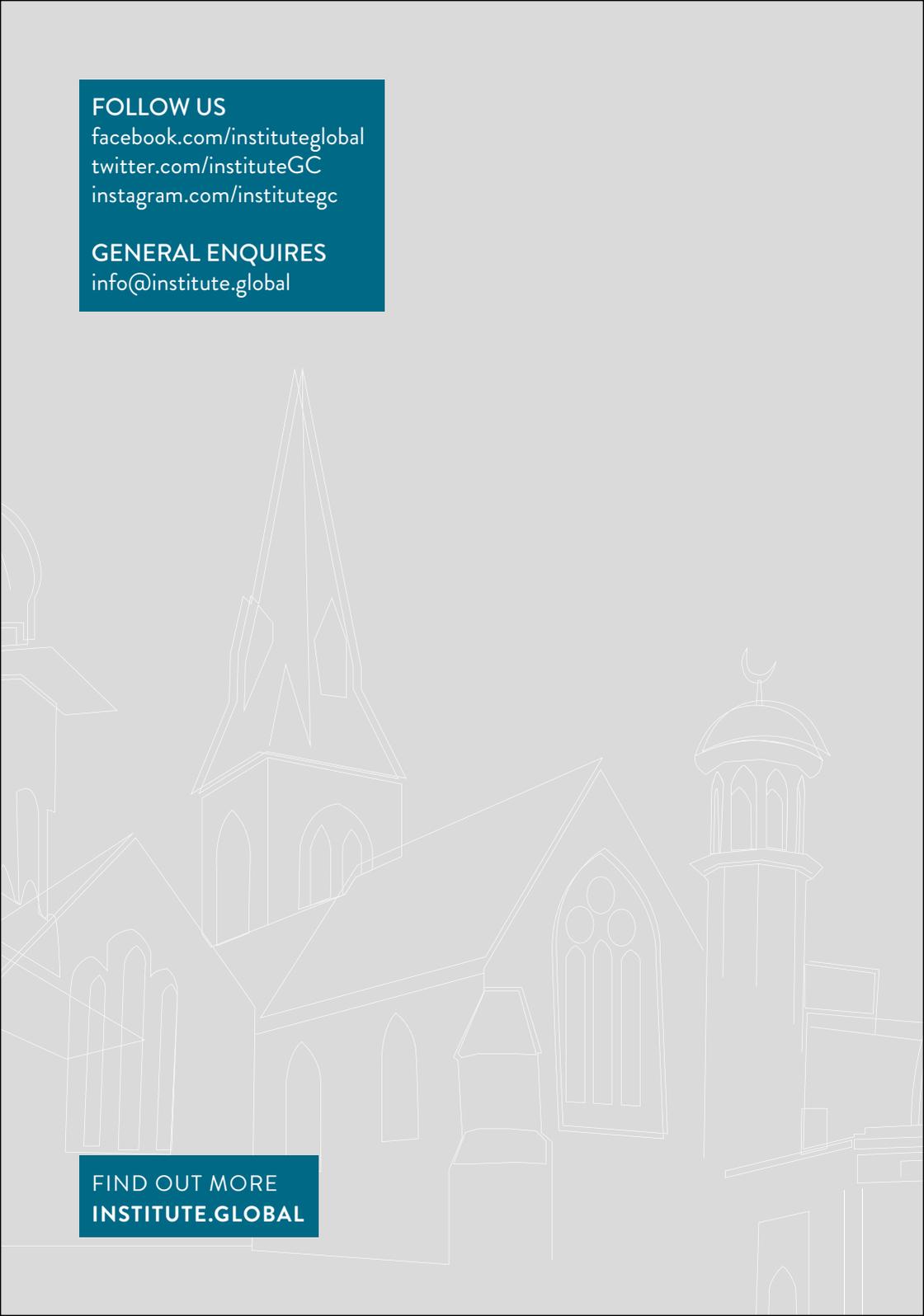
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