



Countering Violent Extremism and Humanitarian Action

Background

*'...Preventing crises will do more to contain violent extremists than countering violent extremism will do to prevent crises....'*¹

The concept of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) gained increasing traction in the years following the 9/11 attacks of 2001 as a holistic approach to combatting terrorism. CVE goes beyond the use of military force against designated terrorist groups. It attempts to employ tools commonly used in development — education, training, economic empowerment, civil society promotion — but with the express aim of preventing or countering individuals' desire to affiliate with extremist groups. With new and expanded groups emerging, and increasing numbers of terrorist attacks, CVE has increasingly become a driving force within the foreign aid agenda of many donor governments.

The United States has been the leader in driving the global CVE agenda. In February 2015 President Obama chaired the CVE Summit in Washington and the subsequent

¹ Crisis Group (Mar, 2016), *Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, Special Report, p.v

September 2015 session at the UN General Assembly, also organised by the U.S. The UN Secretary General committed the UN to the concept by issuing his Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism in December 2015. The Government of Switzerland co-hosted the Geneva Conference on Preventing Violent Extremism in April 2016. This was aimed at providing an opportunity for the international community to share experiences and good practices in addressing the drivers of violent extremism and to build support for the Plan of Action.

Based on an analysis of the countering violent extremism landscape and the intersection between CVE approaches and principled humanitarian action, this position paper outlines NRC's stance towards CVE and associated programs and funding opportunities. NRC's position on CVE is guided by a firm respect for the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.

What is Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)?

The countering violent extremism agenda is primarily motivated by domestic policy concerns in both developed countries and countries in crisis. The main impetus is to

protect the homeland using aid as a tool that complements and increases the effectiveness of military force. CVE approaches are therefore politicised from the outset and incompatible with principled, needs-based humanitarian action.

Like 'terrorism', there is no universally accepted definition of 'violent extremism'². Violent extremism, terrorism and radicalisation are often used interchangeably. For example, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) defines violent extremism as 'advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic or political objectives'³.

Violent extremism can be interpreted more broadly than terrorism, and include a wider range of groups. For example, in its 2011 Prevent Strategy, the UK government defined extremism as 'vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. We also include in our definition of extremism calls for the death of members of our armed forces, whether in this country or overseas'⁴.

States use a variety of terms to define how they respond to violent extremism, with CVE often used interchangeably with Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE). For example, the U.S. considers PVE as part of their CVE approach⁵, whilst Norway⁶ and Switzerland⁷ prefer to only use the term PVE. Some

states prefer to avoid both terms in their strategies aimed at combatting violent extremism, such as the UK⁸.

Examples of CVE Policies & Strategies ⁹

Norway

In June 2014, the Norwegian Government adopted an action plan to improve efforts which prevent radicalisation and violent extremism. The Action Plan outlines the need for more information and cooperation and better coordination between stakeholders: '[T]he goal is to reach persons who are at risk as early as possible and encounter them with measures that work'¹⁰.

United Kingdom

The 'Prevent' strategy is considered one of the first state CVE strategies. It is a component of the UK's wider Contest strategy, which is aimed at countering terrorism. 'Prevent' (published 2007 and revised 2011) is intended to support police and security agencies in identifying individuals and groups at risk of radicalisation from all groups, such as Islamist extremists or the far right. 'Prevent' is defined by the UK's 2015 Counter-Terrorism and Security Act as a community approach to CVE.



Prevent was criticised after funds were used to help pay for CCTV cameras in Muslim areas of Birmingham, Aug 2014, BBC.

² Modirzadeh, Naz (Jan, 2016), *If It's Broke, Don't Make it Worse: A Critique of the U.N. Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*, Lawfare

³ USAID (September 2011), *The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency: Putting Principles into Practice*, USAID Policy, p. 2

⁴ HM Government (June, 2011), *Prevent Strategy*, p.107

⁵ USAID (May, 2016), *Department of State & USAID Joint Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism*, p.2

⁶ Ambassador Geir O. Pedersen (Feb, 2016), *Statement to the General Assembly, Seventieth Session: The Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*

⁷ Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (Apr, 2016), *Switzerland's Foreign Policy Action Plan on Preventing Violent Extremism*

⁸ HM Government (June, 2011), *Prevent Strategy*, p.25

⁹ This list is not exhaustive.

¹⁰ Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security (June, 2014), *Action plan against Radicalisation and Violent Extremism*, p.5

United States

In January 2016, the US Department of State announced the introduction of a new Global Engagement Center (GEC), to *'coordinate, integrate and synchronize messaging to foreign audiences that undermines the disinformation espoused by violent extremist groups, including ISIL and al-Qaeda, and that offers positive alternatives. The center will focus more on empowering and enabling partners, governmental and non-governmental...'*¹¹.

The work of the GEC forms part of the Department of State and USAID Joint Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism (2016). One of the objectives of the strategy, is to *'employ foreign assistance tools and approaches, including development, to reduce specific political or social and economic factors that contribute to community support for violent extremism in identifiable areas or put particular segments of populations at high risk of violent extremist radicalization and recruitment to violence.'*¹² The U.S. Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism plans to increase their engagement with partners such as the EU, the UN, and the World Bank.

CVE, possibly re-christened Countering Radical Islam, is likely to be one of the major organizing principles of the foreign aid program of the new Trump administration, though to what extent it will be emphasized over military counter-terror strategies is for now uncertain.

Financial Action Task Force

The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) sets anti-terrorist financing and anti-money laundering standards that are used to assess the adequacy of laws in many countries. In June 2016, the FATF published their revised Recommendation VIII to states and its Interpretative Note, which relates specifically to Non-Profit Organisations. This

¹¹ US Department of State (January, 2016), *A New Center for Global Engagement*, Factsheet

¹² US Department of State (May, 2016), *Department of State & USAID Joint Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism*, p.6

is the first time the Interpretative Note cites a link between the work of the non-profit sector¹³ and CVE: *'FATF also recognises the intent and efforts to date of Non-Profit Organisations to promote transparency within their operations and to prevent terrorist financing abuse, including through the development of programmes aimed at discouraging radicalisation and violent extremism.'*¹⁴

Intersection with Humanitarian Action

The UN first accepted CVE language in 2014 in UN Security Council Resolution 2178. This was adopted under Chapter VII of the UN Charter and is thus binding on all states. The resolution lists a number of specific measures to be taken, including *'encouraging Member States to engage relevant local communities and non-governmental actors in developing strategies to counter the violent extremist narrative.'*¹⁵

UN Secretary General's Plan of Action on CVE

In December 2015, the UN Secretary General published his *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*.

The Secretary General recommended that each Member State considers developing a national PVE plan of action. Additionally, the Secretary General instructed UN entities to adopt an 'All-of-UN' approach to supporting national, regional and global efforts to prevent violent extremism.

¹³ The non-profit sector as defined here can refer to both development and humanitarian actors.

¹⁴ Financial Action Task Force (June, 2016), *The FATF Recommendations*, p.54

¹⁵ UN Security Council (2014), Resolution 2178, p.6



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon addresses the Geneva Conference on preventing Violent Extremism, April 2016. UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré

The Plan of Action on PVE clearly links efforts to prevent violent extremism with development: *'[O]ne means of addressing many of the drivers of violent extremism will be to align national development policies with the Sustainable Development Goals,'*¹⁶ At a time when humanitarian and development actors are increasingly discussing the means of bridging the humanitarian and development divide, such alignment could impact principled humanitarian action. Calling for an 'All-of-UN' approach also clearly links PVE with principled humanitarian action, where humanitarian focused UN agencies may find themselves also working within a CVE agenda.

Overall issues with CVE

CVE encompasses a wide range of approaches including domestic surveillance, policing, counter-extremist messaging, and development approaches intended to address the drivers of individuals and communities choosing to align with extremist groups. The latter two components have much in common with counter-insurgency and anti-communist strategies dating back to the Cold War.

Such strategies, encapsulated in the term "Winning Hearts and Minds," which was employed by the U.S. in Vietnam and Afghanistan, have a poor track record. Communications can easily become propaganda. Proponents of CVE seldom acknowledge that legitimate grievances,

¹⁶ United Nations General Assembly (Dec. 2015), *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism Report of the Secretary-General*, p.12

deriving from the way the global, national, and local political systems function, may drive people to choose the extremist path. Further, development efforts in the name of causes other than meeting the basic needs of vulnerable people may distort the choice of target communities and individuals involved, as well as the concrete outcomes of the programs.

Whether development interventions actually reduce violent extremism is at best unproven. Evidence that conscious CVE approaches have successfully reduced extremism is scarce. This does not prevent exaggerated claims being made as to the likely efficacy of particular interventions, especially in the education sector.

CVE also raises profound problems in terms of the integrity of the engagement between external aid actors and communities. The assumption of the CVE approach is that there are places vulnerable to extremism in which most anyone is a potential terrorist. If communities are aware that combatting extremism is the motivation for the agency's engagement, this will distort the relationship and make community ownership and partnership more challenging.

Tensions between CVE and Humanitarian Principles

There is as yet little documented evidence of impact (good or bad) of CVE programs on humanitarian operations at field level or of tensions with humanitarian principles. However, trends are emerging as CVE language increasingly appears in donor partnership agreements with humanitarian actors, which may be in tension with principled humanitarian action as follows:

1. One donor uses the following language in contracts with humanitarian organisations: *'Humanitarian efforts must be linked with the affected person's longer term development needs as a means to promote post-conflict reintegration and development and to counter potential extremism amongst*

refugee populations and host communities.' Such language suggests that the fundamental rationale for designing a humanitarian response is not the humanitarian imperative to alleviate human suffering arising from conflict or disaster, but rather CVE. The same text also integrates a political agenda with a humanitarian response.

2. As more funding is allocated to CVE/PVE agendas, which advocate the use of foreign assistance tools (see the section above on the U.S. and the UN Secretary General's Plan of Action), there is an increasing risk of tensions with the principles of humanity and impartiality. The funding may be accompanied by conditions which favour geographical areas considered to be vulnerable to extremism rather than areas with the most urgent humanitarian needs. Education and youth focused programmes are most likely to attract CVE funding.
3. There is also a risk of tension between CVE-led programming and restrictive counterterrorism measures. CVE programmes mean engaging with those at risk of turning to violent extremism, which would include individuals who may be associated with designated terrorist groups, even if they are not terrorists themselves. NRC has examined counterterrorism measures extensively and has highlighted the considerable risks to humanitarian actors and humanitarian principles which arise from counterterrorism clauses in donor partnership agreements, such as those which prohibit organisations from providing material support not only for designated terrorist groups but also those "associated with" with them¹⁷.

NGO Perspectives:

There are at least two schools of thought on CVE within the NGO community. One group of NGOs sees CVE as an opportunity to draw

on their extensive community-level experience with education and peacebuilding programmes to demonstrate that extremist violence can be reduced through dedicated efforts. These NGOs seek to combine community-level work with advocacy in donor capitals to limit the potential damage of simplistic approaches. With major donors and the UN committed to the CVE agenda, funding will certainly be available for willing NGOs. This support might partially compensate for shortfalls in humanitarian funding.

The second group of NGOs are those who are inclined to proceed cautiously due to concerns about the potential distorting effect of this funding and tensions with the humanitarian principles, especially as it relates to the independence and impartiality of work in conflict situations. NRC will continue to prioritise a principled humanitarian response, and will assess each funding opportunity on the basis of its respect for humanitarian principles.

World Humanitarian Summit (WHS):

Commitments from donors or UN agencies on mitigating the impact of counterterrorism and CVE measures on humanitarian action were notably absent at the WHS. So too were commitments around proportional risk sharing and risk management. NRC made a CVE related commitment at WHS: '*We commit to providing impartial assistance and protection based on needs alone, rather than countering violent extremism and other political agendas*'.

¹⁷ Norwegian Refugee Council (Dec, 2015), *Risk Management Toolkit in Relation to Counterterrorism Measures*, p.11

NRC Positions

- NRC is committed to providing impartial assistance and protection based on needs alone, rather than countering violent extremism and other political agendas.
- NRC opposes any link of humanitarian assistance to CVE; humanitarian aid that is motivated by the CVE agenda is a fundamental threat to humanitarian action.
- NRC will refuse to seek funding under opportunities where the primary objective is to counter or prevent violent extremism.
- On a case-by-case basis, NRC may pursue funding from donors (including UN agencies) that, while not being labelled as countering or preventing extremism, include CVE clauses in the grant agreement. A precondition for seeking and accepting such funding is that adherence with NRC's Project Cycle Management procedures, specifically the Go No Go checklist, is ensured. Hence, NRC must be in a position to independently identify and prioritize needs, preserve a principled approach to its programme, etc.
- Under no circumstances should NRC modify or distort its program priorities based on donor CVE funding or conditionalities.
- Given the likelihood of increasing amounts of funding available for programs explicitly designed to counter violent extremism and increasing donor conditionality in the same direction, NRC will be vigilant so as not to consciously or inadvertently buy into the CVE agenda.
- NRC will be a lead advocate on the issue and challenge states/donors on countering violent extremism measures which may impede or risk impeding principled humanitarian action.
- NRC will be involved in and encourage further study to examine the evolution and potential impact of CVE agendas on humanitarian action in partnership with like-minded agencies.
- NRC will ensure that all offices are coherent in their approach to pursuing and accepting CVE linked funding. If in doubt, NRC Country Offices and units must consult NRC Head Office and organizational policies.

Links to other relevant information:

<https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/nrc-risk-management-toolkit-2015/>

<https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/study-of-the-impact-of-donor-counterterrorism-measures-on-principled-humanitarian-action/>

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