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Community cohesion projects to prevent violent extremism

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Question

How have community cohesion/community resilience projects been used to successfully prevent violent extremism? Focus on community level interventions, and areas where Daesh[1] was active.

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[1] This review predominantly uses the term Daesh, but where the literature uses alternative names – the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) – these are given.

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1. Summary

This review looks at the use of community cohesion[2] projects to prevent or counter violent extremism (P/CVE). It finds that such initiatives can be helpful in conflict-affected societies, but there are limited evaluations in the literature, and these generally do not make a direct causal link between interventions to promote social (community) cohesion and P/CVE.

The retreat of Daesh from territories under its control, notably in Iraq and Syria, has created a massive challenge of bringing about integration between divided communities, notably populations seen as having collaborated with the group, former combatants, and those who suffered persecution or were displaced because of Daesh. Failure to bring about social cohesion carries the real risk of renewed extremism, violence and conflict.

Social cohesion can help prevent/counter violent extremism (P/CVE) by building relationships and reducing the marginalisation that is a potential driver of extremism. There is considerable overlap between social cohesion and the reintegration aspect of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes.

Initiatives to promote social cohesion can be divided into those where this is the primary objective, and those where this is seen as a 'by-product' of other goals, notably development. This review focuses on the former. Approaches to promoting social cohesion include: joint collaboration on development projects; opportunities for mixing and interaction between different groups; inter-group dialogues; and awareness-raising/sensitisation workshops.

The review found some evidence in the literature for the link between community cohesion and P/CVE. A study of peacebuilding programmes in Africa found that local counter-narratives created and disseminated by trusted community leaders were a prominent protective factor against VE. It also found that if members of distinct groups had opportunities to discuss their perspectives and were provided strategies for forging relationships with one another, they would be more tolerant of one another and be less likely to support VE. Studies of VE in Kenya echo these findings: association between members of different religious groups was found to be a significant factor in building resilience to VE.

The review identified a diverse range of projects being carried out to promote social cohesion in conflict-affected regions, notably those formerly controlled by Daesh. Projects in Iraq include: brokering of reconciliation agreements between different communities to reduce violence; support to local civil society organisations to conduct local dialogues on divisions and how to overcome them; establishment of youth centres open to all communities, and collective community development projects.

However, as noted above, few evaluation documents for such projects were found, and the literature generally failed to establish a causal link between community cohesion *interventions* and P/CVE.

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[2] This report uses the Council of Europe's definition of social cohesion: 'the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members – minimising disparities and avoiding marginalisation – to manage differences and divisions and ensure the means of achieving welfare for all members.'

The literature used for this review largely comprised of programme/project documents and grey literature. Overall, it was found to be gender-blind, and made no mention of persons with disabilities.

2. Community cohesion as tool to prevent or counter violent extremism (P/CVE)

Post-conflict challenges

The defeat of Daesh has left in its wake deeply divided societies. In Iraq, Daesh controlled some 20 major cities with a total civilian population in excess of 5 million (Revkin, 2018: 4). In those territories, many people had no choice but to operate services such as hospitals and schools for the group; residents and relatives of Daesh members had to cooperate with it or face the real risk of being punished by death. However, when Daesh retreated from Iraqi territory in 2017, it left behind a population that Iraqi authorities "overwhelmingly regard as complicit in terrorism" (Revkin, 2018: 4). Individuals associated with Daesh – whether as combatants, civilian employees, family members, or mere residents of Daesh-controlled territory – have been stigmatised and penalised by local communities (Revkin, 2018). Iraq thus faces a huge challenge of re-integrating this population into Iraqi society.

Culbertson and Robinson (2017) stress the importance of resolving sectarian and ethnic conflict in Iraq if it is to avoid becoming a permanently failed state. They note that the majority of ISIS fighters were drawn from Iraq's Sunni population and warn that ISIS or its successor will gain traction in Sunni areas if long-standing grievances aren't resolved. In Mosul they found that some Iraqis feared they would be targeted as collaborators by Iraqi or Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) security forces or militias; minority communities (Yazidis, Christians) also feared their Sunni Arab neighbours, whom they viewed as complicit in the atrocities of ISIS. Moreover, after two years under ISIS rule, many children and youth were indoctrinated with extremist ideas and trained as militants. Among other recommendations, Culbertson and Robinson (2017: 53) call for reconciliation: "conflict resolution and similar measures are needed at the local level to stitch communities back together".

Referring to the incarceration of ISIS families in Iraq – including anyone suspected or reported of having even loose ties to ISIS fighters – Abouaoun and Gallagher (2019) highlight the fact that many innocents are being held, and warn of the dangers of renewed extremism in post-Daesh Iraq:

> "the country is in dire need of a unified, coherent national reconciliation strategy, one that reintegrates innocent people back into communities which should be prepared to accept them and acknowledge that they too have suffered at the hands of ISIS. Otherwise, Iraq risks losing another generation of youth to extremist ideology and action."

Link between social cohesion and PVE

Increased social (community) cohesion builds relationships and reduces the marginalisation that can be a potential driver of VE (Mitchell, 2018). Haider (2009: 11) explains the logic behind community-led approaches to integration: "The assumption is that participation in common projects, such as service delivery, livelihood and community development projects, and structured interaction among previously divided communities will help to reframe perceptions of

the 'other', dispel negative myths and facilitate changes in perceptions and attitudes." Haider (2009) distinguishes between community-led projects in which social renewal is a key aim, to those in which it is treated as a possible by-product of processes to achieve other aims (typically material development goals). She notes that activities under both could well be similar, but differ in the degree of effort put toward fostering social renewal. Thus both could feature inclusive participatory mechanisms, identification of shared needs and cooperation to achieve them, but (Haider, 2009: 12):

> "…where social renewal is treated as an aim in itself, implementers are more likely to take further steps and to pro-actively facilitate dialogue, trust and empathy through activities where outcomes are non-material and not easily observable. These include training events that seek to change participant perceptions, relationship building exercises and conflict transformation workshops."

Haider (2009: 13) warns that it is important to ensure social cohesion programmes – aimed at bringing together divided groups – are well thought out, as well as carefully designed and implemented; otherwise they could end up exacerbating tensions.

Overlap between social cohesion and DDR

There is considerable overlap between social cohesion in relation to former combatants and the reintegration aspect of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes. Reintegration in the context of DDR entails a "complex, differentiated, multi-dimensional process to socially, economically and politically rebuild the very fabric of community and civilian life" (Astrom & Ljunggren, 2016: 3). Among the challenges involved, Astrom and Ljunggren (2016) point to resentment if former combatants are the only ones receiving assistance; and anger among community members towards former combatants, because they have committed acts of violence (even atrocities) – which will be even stronger where the violence was directed at people within the community. Astrom and Ljunggren (2016) stress the importance of community-led social integration and identify a number of guidelines/principles to ensure this is effective:

- *Inclusion and participation* – all stakeholders need to be taken into account and included, and need to take active and complementary roles in building more cohesive societies;
- *Dialogue* – dialogue processes are vital to bring about engagement and should be an integral part of a comprehensive strategy of interventions towards social integration;
- *Reintegration* of former combatants must be a community-level pursuit – though this does not negate the importance of individual contributions as well as national institutions;
- Social cohesion entails developing a *collaborative vision* for a common future – often this needs not just a minor correction of the situation in the community prior to the conflict, but a major overhaul of society in order to address the root causes of the conflict;
- Once a shared vision of a peaceful society is elaborated, projects and/or activities that would lead to the fulfilment of this vision need to be *identified*;
- Assistance and support *should not be limited* to former combatants, but extended to other population segments in the community as well, e.g. youth with similar socioeconomic profiles as former combatants, IDPs, and other victims and vulnerable individuals with specific needs, and
- Rather than designing and deciding interventions elsewhere and then sharing them with the community, the community itself should be put in the driving seat – so they identify needs to be addressed, and are *empowered to have ownership* of the process.

Astrom and Ljunggren (2016: 10-11) identify the most important thing as creating 'an arena where all population segments in a post-conflict community could, in a transparent way, meet and express their view points, feelings, fears and expectations without risks of retaliations or revenge'. They note that external partners (such as international development organisations) can support the process by facilitating dialogue, building local capacity and funding projects/activities.

Approaches to community-based social cohesion

As explained in the Summary, this review focuses on community projects specifically aimed at promoting social cohesion, and not on projects – notably community development projects - in which social cohesion is seen as a desirable 'by-product.' Approaches to the former can be diverse and entail both interventions aimed at reintegration of former combatants, and those geared at promoting reconciliation and cohesion between different ethnic/religious/other groups within the same area. The literature highlights the diversity of initiatives, including (among others):

- Different communities/groups working together on identification, planning and implementation of local development projects;

- Setting up community centres where people from different communities can mix;

- Organising activities (e.g. sports competitions, cultural events) which allow people from different groups to mix and interact;

- Conducting inter-group dialogues;

- Using local leaders to promote interaction and understanding between different groups;

- Carrying out awareness-raising and sensitisation workshops, and

- Brokering reconciliation agreements between different communities/groups whereby they commit to respect the rule of law and not resort to violence.

3. Evidence of social cohesion-P/CVE link

Peacebuilding approaches to P/CVE in Africa

A review of peacebuilding approaches to preventing/countering VE covering 14 initiative across ten countries and four regions (mostly in Africa) looked at evidence for (among others) two *theories of change* (TOC) linking social cohesion to P/CVE (Myers & Hume, 2018: 10-11):

1. If trusted leaders in the community are *empowered* to understand and mitigate the risks of VE, they will exert their influence to resist VE movements and levels of VE will go down.
2. If members of distinct groups have opportunities to *discuss* their perspectives and are provided with *strategies* for forging relationships with one another, they will be more tolerant of one another and be less likely to support VE.

With regard to the first TOC, the review found that qualitative evidence for it was strong. In one case, comparing similar communities with different levels of VE, it was found that local counter-narratives created and disseminated by trusted community leaders were among the most prominent protective factors against VE (Myers & Hume, 2018: 10). 'Community leaders were also successful in facilitating inter-group connections; when leaders from different religions

cooperated with one another on projects and in dialogue, others followed suit and reported improved attitudes toward members of the other religion' (Myers & Hume, 2018: 11). Another case found that individuals were more likely to seek and trust the advice of established community leaders than civil society organisations (CSOs). However, the authors noted the need for quantitative evidence to confirm the relationship between trusted community leaders and fall in VE.

With regard to the second TOC, the review found convincing evidence from several cases that social cohesion increased resiliency to VE. "For example, a comparison of socially, economically, and demographically similar areas where levels of VE were disparate demonstrated through quantitative analysis and focus group interviews that significant Christian-Muslim association was instrumental in protecting communities from VE" (Myers & Hume, 2018: 11). However, the authors noted that the cases focused on examining existing social dynamics, rather than the contribution to these by peacebuilding programming: the cases did not tie changes in levels to social cohesion to peacebuilding programming.

Kenya: community resilience to VE

VE among Muslim communities has been a source of concern in Kenya. The country has seen an increase in activity, including violent attacks, by al-Shabaab; recruitment for the war in Somalia; radicalisation of youth; infiltration of local mosques, and illicit financial transactions (Van Metre, 2016: 5). One study conducted in Nairobi and Mombasa looked at community-level resilience to VE in different communities, and sought to determine whether significant or correlated resilience factors identified across communities directly limited or mitigated the activities of violent groups (Van Metre, 2016). In the study, communities at equal risk of VE but different levels of extremist activity in the form of radicalisation, recruitment or attacks were paired for analysis.

One of the key findings (relevant for this review) was the importance of community members associating with members from different religious groups. Two communities – Kongowea and Kisauni – had similar levels and types of risks, but the former was entirely free of VE activity while the latter had experienced all types of VE: recruitment, operating bases, harassment, exposure to radical ideologies, and attacks (Van Metre, 2016: 26). The source of Kongowea's resilience to VE was found to be strong social cohesion—both Muslim-Muslim and Christian-Muslim associations occurred in multiple ways. Thus, for example, neighbourhoods were highly integrated, with different ethnic groups living together; people shared the same social amenities such as church, mosque, schools, and health facilities; and many community members from different religious and ethnic groups congregated every morning at local newspaper stands to discuss politics.

International Alert, in partnership with the Kenya Muslim Youth Alliance (KMYA), carried out an assessment of the factors fuelling or mitigating violence in six neighbourhoods of Mombasa; the six targeted communities were considered vulnerable to VE (International Alert, 2016: 8). The research hypothesis applied was that resilience to VE can be linked to the strength of three kinds of relationships: between and within communities; between generations, and between citizens and the state. The study entailed extensive field research (key informant interviews and focus group discussions) in each of the six neighbourhoods to look at the strength of these three relations as an indication of their vulnerability to, or resilience against, radicalisation and violence. It found that erosion of all three relationships was correlated with reduced resilience; conversely, instances were found where the existence of stronger relationships had helped

reduce the risk of radicalisation and violence (International Alert, 2016: 8). The study's recommendations were therefore tailored to increasing resilience through improved relationships. Specifically, with regard to inter-community relations (the most relevant for this review) the study's recommendations included:

- engaging more consistently with religious leaders, and – in multi-faith neighbourhoods – with both Christian and Muslim religious leaders, as a way to improve citizen–state and inter-community relations;

- encouraging political, religious and community leaders of all ages to work together to offset divisive narratives between communities, and reduce the widespread stigmatisation of Muslims and Somalis in public discourse;

- creating new narratives of collaboration and Kenyan citizenship, through joint local initiatives for practical self-help and mutual help, community-level reconciliation and inter-ethnic solidarity.

4. Community cohesion projects

Iraq

In Hawija in the Kirkuk province of Iraq, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and its strategic implementing partner Sanad for Peacebuilding, helped bring about local reconciliation agreements between tribal leaders who committed to respect the rule of law and not resort to violence when dealing with the return to the community of family members of suspected terrorists (Abouaoun & Gallagher, 2019). The two organisations were able to win the buy-in of both the local and central government. This prevented what many assumed would be inevitable bloodshed in a post-conflict setting (Abouaoun & Gallagher, 2019). Reconciliation was brokered in Tikrit, in Salah al-Din Province, where up to 1,700 Shia air-force cadets were massacred by ISIS fighters (Culbertson & Robinson, 2017: 60). USIP had teams of local Iraqi facilitators who were experienced in conflict resolution and had conducted work in hotspots other than Tikrit in five provinces: Kirkuk, Anbar, Diyala and Ninewa Province. Their work was coordinated with the United Nations as well as with the Iraqi government.

In their report on the reintegration of former combatants in Iraq after ISIL, Parry and Burlinghaus (2019: 17) make a number of recommendations. Those especially relevant to social cohesion are:

- *Reintegration assistance must take a community-based approach to avoid fuelling local tension* – the communities to which combatants return to are usually poor, lack access to even basic services, and dominated by patronage networks. Federal support directed to ex-combatants could raise questions of fairness: assistance to them should be delivered in such a way that the wider community is an equal beneficiary. This could be achieved by designing, planning, and implementing DDR within a broader recovery and development framework that addresses the social context into which ex-combatants are reintegrating, and consulting community members on the design of DDR programmes.

- *Reintegration activities should help develop positive social connections between ex-combatants and community members* – this could be done through joint micro-projects that engage both ex-combatants and community members in services for the benefit of the public. Community development projects that link employment and public service could also support this goal.

Culbertson and Robinson (2017: 61) describe a three-part nationwide programme initiated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2017 to facilitate reconciliation and social cohesion. It comprised of: a) a national mass media campaign to educate the public on the benefits and urgency of reconciliation; b) the provision of funding to CSOs to organise local community gatherings to discuss local divisions and how to overcome them, and c) a national memory projects designed to collect accounts of atrocities and abuses. They call for an increase in the amount of stabilisation funding devoted to local-level projects including the UNDP programme (Culbertson & Robinson, 2017: 71): "Donors such as the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the EU should increase funding to grassroots reconciliation efforts through the U.S. Institute of Peace, UNDP, IOM, and Iraqi non-governmental organisations (NGOs). A coordinating body should prioritize and deconflict efforts to ensure areas of critical needs are served."

A two-year project in the Hamdanya and Tilkelf districts of the Nineveh Plain, Iraq, aims to strengthen social cohesion, intercultural and cooperation dialogue between the different communities returning home to the Nineveh Plain after its liberation from Daesh.[3] The project invests in the role of young men and women as a way to prevent further tension and conflict. It entails peace education initiatives directed at (among others) teachers, parents and children; and the creation of four youth centres open to all communities. Each centre will host activities, workshops and training courses on issues relating to non-formal education, peace education, sport and art against violence, knowledge and conservation of the community's cultural heritage, and inter-religious dialogue.

In Mosul, Iraq – a city devastated by years of conflict - the NGO Premiere Urgence Internationale is undertaking a multi-sectoral programme aimed at strengthening social cohesion.[4] Activities include: collective community projects which help people to work together – both in identifying work that needs to be done, and in carrying it out; setting up community centres to 'get community life back on its feet' – to serve as a meeting place, have recreational activities, training workshops, etc., and awareness-raising about issues such as the danger of mines, gender-based violence and psychological first aid care.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is carrying out social cohesion activities as part of its stabilisation programming in Iraq. The activities aim to bring people together and foster positive interaction. The underlying principle is that restored trust and enhanced social cohesion will build community resilience in the face of (re-)emerging crises. "While simply bringing people together may appear a very low starting point, IOM believes that the depth of mistrust which has arisen from the country's complex history makes it necessary to take a long-term, phased approach to increase levels of acceptance, cooperation, trust, and resilience" (IOM, 2018: 4). The phased approach taken by IOM comprises of (IOM, 2018: 4):

- Phase I: Organisation of cultural events, social gatherings, and other community-led and driven activities in support of initial trust-building;
- Phase II: Organisation of awareness sessions, structured debates, dialogue groups and community initiatives to address topics of public concern; provision of support to local actors to enable them to organise themselves across sectarian and political divisions; organisation of peace-building and women's leadership courses, and

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[3] https://www.unponteper.it/en/projects/maan-lil-salam/

[4] https://www.premiere-urgence.org/en/in-mosul-premiere-urgence-internationale-works-towards-social-cohesion/

- Phase III: Provision of support to locally-driven mediation and (local) conflict mitigation initiatives.

In 2018, IOM reported that it had involved 104,111 people (54,106 males and 50,005 females) in the design and planning of community-based social cohesion activities (IOM, 2018: 4).

Syria

Haid (2018) describes a local reconciliation process in rural Aleppo, Syria, to deal with former ISIS members. He notes that the lack of formal efforts to deal with post-ISIS problems pushed CSOs to establish ad hoc and limited community-based initiatives to overcome that gap (Haid, 2018: 23). The case he describes "stands as a clear example of the rare attempts to address the issue of reintegrating ISIS members within rebel-controlled communities" (Haid, 2018: 24). It took place in Atarib in early 2014, where the local resistance to ISIS was followed by a community-led reconciliation process that – despite clear shortcomings – allowed the majority of local ISIS members to leave the group and reintegrate within the community. The process had two phases (Haid, 2018: 24-15):

- Prior to the confrontation that saw ISIS defeated in the city, Atarib's residents offered protection to ISIS members if they abstained from fighting. The advice was clearly relayed, via public communication channels, walkie-talkies and the mosques, that those who opted not to fight on behalf of ISIS would be safe. Most local ISIS members subsequently conveyed, via their families, that they were unwilling to fight. Such individuals received protection guarantees from the city's local military leaders and public elders on the condition that they did not leave their homes during the fight. Indeed, all those who chose not to fight remained at home. A former rebel fighter who participated in the fighting stated:

  "We decided to give people a way out in case they wanted one. We all make mistakes, and people should always have a second chance. Moreover, killing locals, even if they are members of ISIS, will badly impact the relationship between the residents of the city. Luckily, almost all of the locals decided not to fight, which weakened ISIS and preserved the unity of our community."

- The second phase followed the defeat of ISIS in Atarib, where its local members were issued with clear instructions to surrender their weapons to the nearest armed faction, and to declare their dissociation from the group. There were no collective punishments or prosecutions, although all former ISIS members were temporarily banned from carrying weapons in public. Prosecutions were, however, pursued in the case of some individuals against whom charges were already pending, or against those in which sufficient evidence existed to warrant criminal prosecution.

Haid (2018) concludes that the process was partially successful in allowing former ISIS members to continue to live peacefully in the city, but it had a number of serious failings. One, there were no enforcement mechanisms to ensure that former ISIS members did not join other radical groups (Haid, 2018: 25). Two, there were no clear follow-through mechanisms on the process to protect former ISIS members; consequently, some of those previously associated with ISIS were subject to discriminatory behaviour and social stigma (Haid, 2018: 25). Also, some ex-fighters were reported to have subsequently re-joined ISIS elsewhere – highlighting the dangers if social cohesion is neglected. Other shortcomings included the lack of a clear plan to deal with captured ISIS fighters, and the lack of systematic efforts to counter ISIS's ideology on either the individual or community level (Haid, 2018: 25).

Afghanistan

The Community Cohesion Initiative (CCI) was implemented by USAID/Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) in seven provinces in the east, south and southwest regions of Afghanistan.[5] As well as strengthening ties between local actors, customary governance structures and the Afghan government, it seeks to increase resilience in areas vulnerable to insurgent exploitation by increasing cohesion among and between communities. Activities undertaken specifically aimed at the latter (increasing social cohesion) include funding of a youth cricket tournament in Kandahar City, and implementation of community cohesion meetings (jirgas) across the target provinces.

Africa

In Africa UNDP is implementing a four-year regional development programme to prevent and respond to VE. The programme has several components, with one aimed at building community resilience to VE. Activities being undertaken under this component include conducting a series of inter-faith and intra-faith dialogues in key hotspot areas to help lower tensions and raise awareness about radicalisation processes. Where possible, traditional leaders are being leveraged to help reduce tensions and build inter-linkages between communities to strengthen resilience. In some contexts, this involves setting up committees of wise men/women (UNDP, 2017: 23). Similar activities are carried out under another component focused on reintegration of former members of extremist groups. Communities are engaged in a series of dialogue processes and sensitisation programmes to lower tensions and help ensure that those disengaging from VE groups, and their families are able to successfully reintegrate into their communities without stigma and discrimination (UNDP, 2017: 21).

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