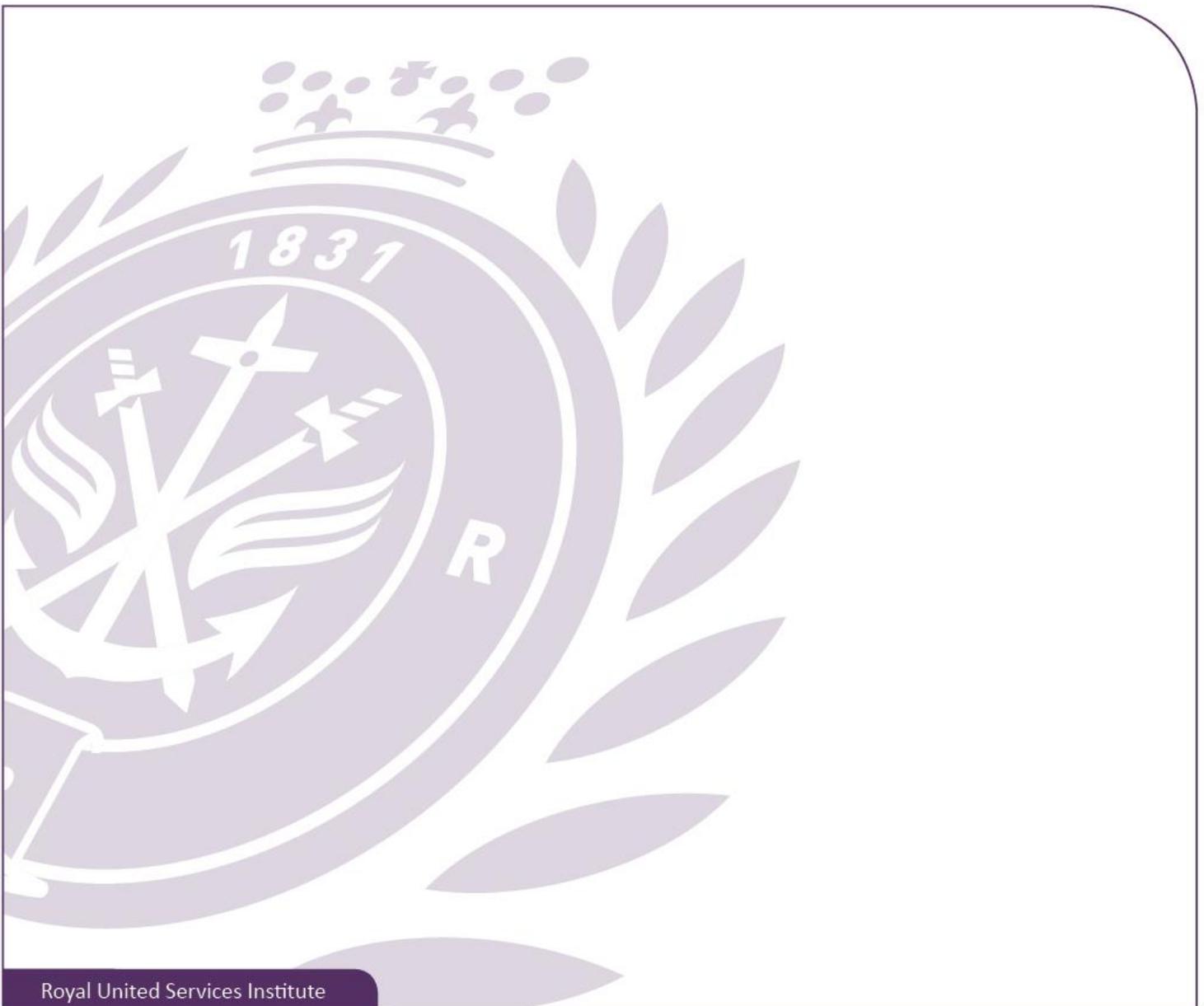**The Prevention Project**
Organizing Against Violent Extremism

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CVE Practitioner Workshop: Opportunities and Challenges for Civil Society in Pushing Back against Violent Extremism

Meeting Summary, 26th and 27th July 2016

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Royal United Services Institute

The [Royal United Services Institute](#) (RUSI) and the [Prevention Project](#) convened some 25 representatives from civil society, including from international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working to prevent or counter violent extremism in a range of contexts. Participants examined the challenges civil society actors are facing in implementing local CVE[1] initiatives and explored opportunities for improving existing approaches. During the two-day workshop, which was conducted under the *Chatham House Rule*, participants, *inter alia,* 1) highlighted a diversity of civil society-led CVE initiatives in different regions; 2) explored the importance of and challenges to building the trust between governments and communities that is critical for effective civil society-led CVE work; 3) discussed how national governments can be enablers and obstacles to locally-led efforts to prevent the spread of violent extremism; 4) considered the challenges the "CVE" label can present donor and civil society partners; 5) underscored the need to build the capacity of local civil society organizations (CSOs) as part of a long-term CVE effort; 6) stressed the importance of scaling up networking – at the national and regional levels – among civil society actors engaged on CVE; 7) highlighted the need to ensure connectivity between the global CVE discourse and the priorities of those community confronting violent extremist threats; and 8) considered whether the current international infrastructure support local civil society practitioners sufficient and what revisions can be made to more effectively operationalize a "whole of society" approach to CVE.

SELECT RECOMMENDATIONS:

Among the key recommendations put forward during the meeting were:

1. CVE efforts should focus on strengthening rather than securitizing local communities.
2. Rather than implementing CVE projects in local communities, governments should focus on creating an enabling environment for CSOs to do so. Governments should avoid imposing their CVE agenda on CSOs.
    o With this in mind, CSOs should be encouraged to become more entrepreneurial so they can develop into self-sustainable entities that are helped by, but not dependent on, external financing.
3. Strengthening the state-citizen relationship lies at the heart of effective CVE efforts and sustained engagement between the community and local authorities, including the police, is critical to repairing any breaches of and building trust between the government and communities**.**
4. There is a need for greater networking opportunities at the local, national, and regional levels for CSOs working on CVE; this would allow for more sharing of lessons-learned, collaboration, and training.
    o A dedicated, independent, locally-owned civil society network focused on connecting CSOs working on CVE (whether or not labelled as such) should be established in each region.
5. National governments need to ensure that counterterrorism and CVE policies are mutually reinforcing and donors should address the current policy incoherence between their CVE policies and funding practices.

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[1] Unless explicitly noted, this summary uses the terms PVE and CVE inter-changeably.

o   For example: a) donors should be prepared to consider supporting the most credible, non-violent, community-based CSOs, regardless of their political or religious affiliation and b) rather than treating local CSOs primarily as project implementers, donors should consider directing more of their resources to building the capacity of these local partners (including via core funding support), which would then become better positioned to become agents of change and advocates for the type of legal and policy changes that are needed to maximize the impact of short-term, donor-funded CVE projects

6.   The linkages between CVE and related disciplines, e.g., mental health and social work, need to be strengthened at the local level, as CSOs working on CVE projects increasingly require training and/or expertise in such disciplines to maximize the impact of their work.

7.   Creating sustainable, locally-based and owned platforms in marginalized communities to build trust, identify individual and communal indicators of violent extremism, air grievances, and design and implement tailored interventions should be a priority and should be framed around concerns as viewed through the lens of members of the community rather than of donors.

8.   The international CVE architecture should be updated to ensure that local needs and priorities are more fully reflected in global CVE discussions. For example, the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) could form a civil society working group comprised of international NGOs and local CSOs working involved in CVE work, which could feed into the Forum's Coordinating Committee and regional and thematic working groups.

9.   International NGOs, because of their presence in New York and partnerships with community-based groups working to counter violent extremism, should do more to ensure that the UN CVE conversations are informed by what is going on the ground and vice versa.

o   This could be done through the formation of an international civil society advisory group that not only ensures that local voices are heard in New York, but creates a score card to assess the implementation of the CVE commitments national governments are making at the UN.

MEETING HIGHLIGHTS:

1.   **COMMUNITIES IN FOCUS**

- Participants highlighted a number of locally-led efforts to prevent violent extremism, emphasizing the importance of ensuring that the programs are context-specific and informed by rigorous "stakeholder analysis".   For example, a project   in Northern Mali (and elsewhere in the region) was presented. The project initially found that most of the young people being recruited into terrorist groups were enrolled in two madrassas that were teaching "Wahhabism" and promoting literalist rather than more spiritual Islamic scholars. The program thus focused on working with each Quranic school – with the blessing of the Grand Imam of Timbuktu – to change the curriculum, including through the introduction of more philosophical texts, to emphasize critical thinking.

- Participants discussed the situation in Northern Morocco, from where most of the "foreign fighters" that have left Morocco for the conflict in Syria and Iraq, reside. It was pointed out that some of the perpetrators of the March 2004 Madrid bombings came from these

communities and some of those responsible for the attacks in Paris and Brussels can be traced to this region. It was noted that this part of Morocco comprises close-knit, rural communities, with a strong tribal culture. It was asserted that the Moroccan government allowed Salafism to establish deep roots in these communities – as a counter-weight to the secular opposition in the 1960s – and today it is very established. This, coupled with the lack of opportunity and high-employment, was cited by some participants as reasons for why these communities have been a hot-spot for violent extremist recruitment. The local youth haven't received the necessary job or critical thinking skills – gravitating towards smuggling to make a living. When the region has seen economic growth and new businesses emerge, the point was made that the new jobs were not going to local but to the "urban youth" from Casablanca or Tangier, further perpetuating a cycle of unequal economic growth and increased political and social marginalization.

- The importance of promoting collaboration among governments, the private sector, and NGOs to develop targeted counter-narratives and providing positive alternatives to young people who might otherwise be drawn to violent extremist propaganda was highlighted. For example, a new network is uniting youth activists, artists and tech entrepreneurs to amplify efforts to counter violent extremism, was highlighted. To date, some 650 young people from 100 countries have been involved, with Facebook providing a safe space for discourse among the members and to enable an ongoing and international exchange of practices and know-how, and to foster collaboration and co-creation between its members. The network has piloted innovation labs, which aim to give young people the skills and knowledge they need to create effective counter-narrative campaigns and initiatives.

- Participants discussed the situation in Nigeria, where women are both the victims and perpetrators of violent extremism. It was highlighted that women were responsible for 39 of the 89 Boko Haram attacks committed in 2015 and that 800 women have been rescued from Boko Haram but not given sufficient psycho-social support to allow for reintegration back into their communities. It was pointed out that many suffer from Stockholm Syndrome. One local NGO has tried to develop a verification system to rehabilitate and resettle women who have been rescued from Boko Haram, but much more is needed. It was noted, for example, that the Nigerian government has yet to shift away from a military response to the challenge. It was also pointed out that with the security situation in Northern Nigeria is so unsettled, parents would rather keep their children at home rather than send them to school and risk them being kidnapped or harassed. With no basic literacy skills, the allure of terrorist propaganda is likely to increase.

- Violence prevention efforts in Germany, which initially focused on far-right extremists and now is increasingly focusing on those endangered by "Islamist fundamentalism", were also highlighted. For example, there is now an emergency hotline for families and peers of those being targeted by violent extremist recruitment to reach out to for advice and work is underway with Mosques and Muslim communities to help them to identify individuals who might be at risk of radicalization to violence, including those returning from Syria or Iraq.

- The work of an NGO in Pakistan that is engaging with mothers and young people in the conflict-ridden region of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan was presented. The focus is on sensitizing mothers to the risk of radicalization and raise awareness of the impacts of radicalization and extremism on their lives and the role they can play in countering it. It looks to build critical thinking skills, including through peace

education, across a spectrum of young people – from those already radicalized to those vulnerable to recruitment. It encourages hermetic madrassas to interact with the public and private schools in Pakistan that teach critical thinking skills and seeks to sensitize Parliamentarians regarding the dangers of violent extremism.

- Participants learned about the efforts of an NGO in coastal Kenya to empower community members in Mombasa, which has been at the center of radicalization, disappearances, and extra-judicial killings, to agitate for their rights and security and speak out against the killings and government corruption.

- The activities of a network that is bringing together individuals, groups, and associations of Muslims in Asia that subscribe to and promote progressive Islamic teachings, were highlighted. It was noted that over 19 Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia use narrow, literal interpretative frameworks, with a shrinking space for critical thinking and questioning in the Indonesian educational system. Participants stressed that the government has sought to promote religious tolerance and push back against extremism, including by investigating the funding for religious institutions coming into Indonesia. For its part, the network is disseminating inclusive interpretations of Islamic scripture, consolidating progressive voices into a single movement, strengthening grassroots women's leadership for building social cohesion.

- NGO-led efforts to in Canada to provide settlement and integration services to newcomers and immigrants from Somalia were noted. Building trust and confidence between law enforcement and the religious leadership in the Muslim communities in Canada was emphasized as a foundational requirement for effective integration. The point was made that trust-building efforts may be hard (e.g., may be difficult to convince the relevant sides to come to the table and voice their concerns) and can take time, but it can produce dividends.

- The heavy-handed approach being taken by governments to counter violent extremism in Central Asia has meant that some CSOs are reluctant to get involved in CVE efforts because they do not want to be too closely associated with the security and intelligence services. With deep mistrust among government, CSOs, and religious leaders, one of the prerequisites for effective CVE work is lacking. As a result, an NGO created a platform for members of government and law enforcement agencies, the Muslim community, and civil society to discuss issues related to radicalization in the religious sphere. The platform emphasizes local knowledge and fosters dialogue among women, youth, local leaders, religious actors, and the security sector. It has created an enabling environment to initiate some focused research and other projects that aim to identify and address the drivers of violent extremism in vulnerable communities.

- Participants cited the importance of holistic and multi-faceted CVE strategies, including non-confrontational and 'humiliation free' approaches that advocate discussion rather than direct attacks on the ideological underpinnings of violent extremism, which have a tendency to put target audiences 'immediately on the defensive'.

- Participants also referenced the need for discussion and greater data collection to ascertain the scope of radicalisation within prisons, which are commonly ascribed as 'hot beds' for violent extremism. It is essential to develop a set of best practices to help train prison authorities in human rights based approaches to CVE: helping them accurately identify

prisoners at risk of radicalisation and allowing them to engage more effectively with already radicalised prisoners to change hearts and minds.'

2. **NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS: ENABLERS OR OBSTACLES TO EFFECTIVE CSO-LED CVE WORK?**

- Participants discussed the extent to which national governments can be enablers and/or obstacles to effective, locally-led CVE work. In the case of Nigeria, for example, it was noted that support for is almost non-existent. The previous government's contribution was "pure paperwork that included a well-presented strategy, but with no implementation plan or funds, what's the point?" The new government remains focused on security issues, despite CVE -- which includes effectively reintegrating and rehabilitating the growing number of young men and women being rescued from or otherwise leaving Boko Haram – being a "matter of urgency"

- **Participants underscored the increasing incoherence between counterterrorism and CVE policies**. For example, it was noted that some governments are constricting the space of civil society – which are essential CVE partners – in the name of CVE or security more broadly. This includes overly broad counterterrorism legislation, the freezing of NGO bank accounts, house searches, restricting civil liberties, and limiting foreign funding of NGOs, again, all in the name of security.

- **The point was made that some donor governments have demonstrated a reluctance to support the CVE work of CSOs working with politically-motivated movements, for fear of irritating the host government.** Participants also pointed out instances where donors have asked international NGOs they are funding not to work with local organizations with links to the Muslim Brotherhood, despite the fact that such organizations may be the most credible actors in certain marginalized communities.

- Participants considered how to deal with non-violent, but radical Salafi groups, which may have more impact in convincing would be "terrorists" to alter their behavior. This led to the question of whether providing CVE funding to an organization which might be promoting a world-view that can create a breeding ground for violent extremism should be countenanced or, as in the case of the UK, for example, ruled out by donors.

- **Participants stressed how governments, rather than implementing CVE projects in local communities, should focus on creating an enabling environment for CSOs to do so.** For example, they should provide the necessary legal and policy framework to allow CSOs to work with at-risk individuals or those returning from a conflict zone or leaving a terrorist group. They should help spark private sector involvement in CVE work and provide CSOs with access to public schools and local communities.

- **Participants stressed that governments should avoid imposing their agenda on CSOs.** One said that s/he "works for values, not for interests and does not want the government imposing any agendas" on him/her.

3. **BUILDING TRUST:**

- Participants highlighted how poor or weak governance can lead to lack of trust and feelings of marginalization and alienation that can produce violence and thus **how strengthening the**

relationship between the state and its citizens lies at the heart of effective CVE efforts. Trust is not static, but fluid and can be built up over time.

- Participants discussed the particular challenges of building trust between communities and security agencies, particularly when the latter are often trained to see everyone as a potential criminal and have a history of abuse of power. They recognized the need to move beyond the polarized situation where any affiliation with the police by community members results in social marginalization and community members are reluctant to provide any information on violent extremist behavior to the police because they might quickly find their loved ones detained.

- The point was made that local communities want to be able to provide information to the police on individuals who are celebrating terrorist propaganda or otherwise showing signs of radicalizing to violence, but too often simply don't trust that the information will be handled appropriately. **Participants agreed that sustained engagement between the community and local police (and local authorities more broadly) is critical to repairing any breaches of and building trust.** Identifying constructive representatives of each community to participate in this dialogue, while ensuring that these efforts are not simply "preaching to the already converted" is essential.

- Participants highlighted a concrete example of how the state-citizen relationship was strengthened in Tunisia, where some of the drivers of violent extremism include lack of political participation, marginalization, and trust between young people and the state, whereby they don't see a future for themselves at home.

- One of Google Map's blind spots in Tunisia centered on the Tunis suburb of Ettadhamen, with no details available when one zoomed in. An international peacebuilding NGO used this lacuna as an opportunity to engage young men and boys from marginalized neighborhoods in this suburb, and to forge a positive relationship between them and the local authority. Through Open Street Map, the young men were able to add alleyways, cafes and mosques to the map, creating a picture of their neighborhood. They were then able to pinpoint problems in the community such as lack of street lighting, schools, or hospitals, and bring it to the local authority, whose only existing map was on paper and dated back more than 15 years. It allowed for collaboration between young people and the state, and showed the local officials how young people, rather than being always viewed as a problem, can make positive contributions to the community. Although not necessarily directly related to the impact of this project, it was also noted that after the last municipal elections in Tunisia a new law was passed mandating consultations with communities on municipal budgets.

- **Participants discussed the merits of creating sustainable, locally-based and owned platforms in marginalized communities to build trust, identify individual and communal indicators of violent extremism, air grievances, and design and implement tailored interventions.** It was pointed out that there are a number of such platforms already in existence (although often with limited, short-term funding), some operating within a CVE framework and others framed as "conflict mitigation" or "peacebuilding" efforts.

Participants suggested that scaling up and/or replicating these efforts – and ensuring the necessary cross-learning – should be prioritized.

4. **CVE LABELLING**

- Participants discussed the challenges that the "CVE" label can present. For example, some local communities and organizations view the problem as something other than "violent extremism" and prefer to use a different interpretive lens that looks more deeply into the history, context, and politics of a given conflict. The point was made that if you place the "CVE" frame on the problem or program then you may be looking to address a single issue, when, when it could be just one dimension of a more complex problem

- **Some participants mentioned that CVE is a highly politicized term that is used for programmatic purposes only.** For example, an NGO might use to attract funds from a donor and thus use it a donor project report, however it will not use the term when implementing the project in the relevant local community.

- **It was also pointed out that because of the perception that CVE is the latest donor buzzword, there is a risk that NGOs are dressing up as CVE what might otherwise be labeled a "youth engagement", "peacebuilding", or "conflict mitigation" project.** Because one of the keys to an effective CVE project includes incorporating a distinct theory of change, e.g., linked to either a change in behavior or views about violent or reduction in violent extremism, it was pointed out that simply repackaging or relabeling more traditional development projects as CVE might actually limit the effectiveness of efforts to counter violent extremism.

5. **BUILDING ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY OF LOCAL CSOs**

- **Participants discussed the importance of building the capacity of local CSOs to design and deliver locally-owned, sustainable CVE programs**. It was noted that this was one of the keys to ensuring that CVE efforts will be truly locally owned and driven, and sustainable. Yet, rather than investing in these organizations, it was pointed out that many donors instead focus on project delivery, preferring (including for accountability/ oversight reasons) to provide funding to "middle-men", e.g., international NGOs, which then sub-grant to local partners to implement short-term CVE projects with often extensive oversight by the middle-man and the donor. Although the point was made that some donors do set aside a portion of such grants for training of or other capacity-building support for the local partner.

- Rather than treating local CSOs primarily as project implementers, however, it was recommended that donors consider directing more of their resources to building the capacity (e.g., teaching managerial, administrative, and entrepreneurship skills) of these local partners (including via core funding support), which would then become better positioned to become self-sustainable entities and agents of change and advocates for the type of legal and policy changes that are needed to maximize the impact of short-term, donor-funded CVE projects.

6. **NETWORKING**

- Participants discussed the networking needs of civil society, CVE practitioners. It was pointed out that needs exist at the national, regional, and cross-regional level to ensure that experiences, best practices, and other information is being shared, lessons are being learned, training and collaboration opportunities are maximized, and civil society voices amplified.

- Participants explored the varying opportunities in different countries for networking and collaboration with civil society groups involved in CVE. For example, in Nigeria, a multi-stakeholder coalition of CSOs and government representatives was created in 2015 (Partnership against Violent Extremism) to foster greater awareness of CVE among CSOs, build the capacity of both state and non-state actors in addressing the drivers of radicalization, and strengthen the links between key stakeholders to effectively coordinate CVE activities. In Morocco, there are many different civil society actors working on projects that are linked to CVE – focused on the arts, sports, or music – but these groups are not part of a network and more substantive connectivity among the growing number of organizations working to address the drivers of radicalization is needed. For Niger, civil society organizations lack capacity to implement CVE activities, let alone network or collaborate.

- **Participants highlighted the lack of a common definition of CVE or violent extremism and the varied terminology often used by the different donors funding and/or CSOs working on CVE to describe their program.** They noted that this has made it more difficult to organize civil society around "CVE" as such. Nevertheless, given the growing number of CSO-led CVE (whether labelled as such or not) projects, participants recognized the need for greater horizontal networking among CSOs in this area.

- Rather than create new networks, some encouraged leveraging existing networks focused on peacebuilding (e.g., the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding), women (e.g., Women and Extremism Network), and/or youth (e.g., the United Network of Young Peacebuilders). Others emphasized the need for more informal networking.

- **Yet, some participants called for the creation of specialized, locally-owned networks in each key region that would connect and amplify at the national, regional, and global level the work of the growing number of CSOs engaged in CVE**

7. **THE UN, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL CVE PLANS OF ACTION**

- Participants discussed the impact that the UN Secretary-General Plan of Action on Preventing Violent Extremism (UN POA), in particular its recommendation that all countries adopt their own action plans, might have on community-based CVE work. Participants emphasized the UN's normative role in CVE, however, the point was made that the language in UN documents is often "too diplomatic" to resonate with local communities.   The UN POA, while not a panacea, could be a point of reference for NGOs as they press national governments to allow for the "whole of society" approach to CVE enshrined in the UN document.

- Some participants said that the UN POA could help elevate CVE as a priority within national capitals and influence how they approach the problem of violent extremism. Participants generally agreed that local NGOs should not only advocate for their national government to develop a national CVE plan as called for in the UN document, but to insist on being involved in the development and implementation of such a plan.

- Some participants highlighted the seeming disconnect between the discussions in New York on the UN plan and the community-level realities. It was pointed out that there was no mechanism for international or local NGOs to provide input to the UN in the development or consideration of the plan. **The irony that a plan that calls for a "whole of society" approach to a problem but proceeded to give a voice only to the dominant part of that society, i.e., national governments, which is often part of the problem, was not lost on the participants.**

- Going forward, it was recommended that international NGOs, because of their presence in New York and partnerships with community-based groups working to counter violent extremism, should **do more to ensure that the UN CVE conversations informed by what is going on on the ground and vice versa.** This could be done through **the formation of an international civil society advisory group that could not only ensure that local voices are heard in New York, but create a score card to assess the implementation of the CVE commitments national governments are making at the UN.**

- In addition to the new UN plan of action, it was pointed out that ECOWAS has developed a regional CVE strategy and plan of action, drafted by experts in ECOWAS Commission with extensive input from international NGOs. It was noted, however, that some ECOWAS members are probably unaware of the existence of such a document and that few, if any, members have taken steps to develop a national plan to implement the regional framework.

- Participants highlighted regional CVE efforts in Central Asia, focusing on the Central Asian Consultative Working Group, which has authored an annual series of white papers, with discrete recommendations for a multi-stakeholder approach to addressing violent extremism. The working group brings together community representatives, security and intelligence officials to develop synergy between CVE research and practice. This effort began in 2013 when CVE "wasn't flashy" but was linked with the global CVE efforts starting with the February 2015 White House CVE Summit.

- The CSO-led effort to develop a CVE strategy for Mombasa, which has been submitted to security agencies in Kenya for inputs, was highlighted. The plan, which was developed after consultations with a variety of government and non-government constituencies across the coastal region of Kenya, seeks to address violent extremism and promote human rights, peace, and security." **Participants cited the holistic nature of the document, which was developed in the absence of a national CVE framework and with input from various social and political actors, and noted that it could provide a model for other sub-national authorities to emulate.**

8. **INTERNATIONAL ARCHICTURE – LOCAL CHALLENGES-GLOBAL OPPORTUNITIES**

- Participants discussed the existing international CVE architecture, which includes the Global Counterterrorism Forum's (GCTF) CVE Working Group, the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF), and *Hedayah* – the international CVE center of excellence, as

well as the ad hoc CVE meetings at the UN or regional bodies such as the African Union or Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe.

- Some of the shortcomings of this architecture were highlighted, in particular the limited connectivity to the communities experiencing violent extremism or being targeted by violent extremist propaganda. For example, while representatives from civil society are periodically invited to participate in multilateral CVE meetings, they are not given a voice in determining priorities or shaping agendas for them.   Although GCERF does have civil society representation on its governing board and a select number of such representatives can attend the GCTF Coordinating Committee (i.e., steering group) meetings as observers, this representation is limited to a handful of international NGOs which are generally those implementing GCTF-projects. **Neither *Hedayah* nor the GCTF CVE Working Group has a mechanism to ensure that the CVE perspectives from the ground – and not simply through the often jaded eyes of national government officials – are informing their work. Participants emphasized the need to update the international CVE architecture to ensure that local needs and priorities are more fully reflected in global CVE discussions.**

- It addition, participants highlighted the **need for international NGOs to serve as a bridge for synchronizing local and global inputs – to include the above-mentioned efforts at the UN.** As with the recommended updating of the international CVE architecture, this was needed in order to avoid having the international CVE discourse continue to be defined reductively by the UN and its member states.