

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY FROM THE REPORT:
JOURNEY TO EXTREMISM IN AFRICA
PATHWAYS TO RECRUITMENT AND DISENGAGEMENT



Prevention is
better than cure

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“Violent extremism is not confined to a specific country or region, but rather a shared burden and one that humanity as a whole must respond to. The human stories spotlighted in the *Journey to Extremism in Africa, Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement* provide an evidence base that makes clear the need for renewed international focus, integrative solutions and long-term investments to address the underlying drivers of violent extremism.”

Achim Steiner
UNDP Administrator



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The surge in violent extremism in sub-Saharan Africa undermines hard-won development gains and threatens to hold back progress for generations to come. The need to improve understanding of what drives violent extremism in Africa, and what can be done to prevent it, has never been more urgent.

Sub-Saharan Africa has become the global epicentre of violent extremist activity. Worldwide deaths from terrorism have declined over the past five years, but attacks in this region have more than doubled since 2016. In 2021, almost half of all terrorism-related deaths were in sub-Saharan Africa, with more than one-third in just four countries: Somalia, Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali. Violent extremism (VE) has also spread to other parts of the continent, such as Mozambique, and is having a devastating impact on lives, livelihoods and prospects for peace and development. This is despite an astounding wealth of endogenous resilience manifested by local communities across the continent, who have been at the forefront of prevention and innovative practices of building everyday peace in uncertain times.

These dramatic shifts in violent extremist activity from the Middle East and North Africa to sub-Saharan Africa have garnered relatively little international attention in a world reeling from the impacts of an escalating climate crisis, increasing authoritarianism, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

The surge in violent extremism in sub-Saharan Africa undermines hard-won development gains and threatens to hold back progress for generations to come. The need to improve understanding of what drives it in Africa, and what can be done to prevent it, has never been more urgent. The United Nations Secretary-General's 2021 report, *Our Common*

Agenda, stresses the importance of an evidence-driven approach to address development challenges. In 2017, UNDP published a groundbreaking study, *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment*. This established a robust evidence base on the drivers of violent extremism, with important implications for policy and programming. As a major output of UNDP's multi-year Programme on Preventing and Responding to Violent Extremism in Africa (2015-2022), the 2017 study informed and shaped UNDP's approach across the continent, as well as its programming at national and regional levels.

Based on the personal testimonies of former members of VE groups and a reference group of individuals living in similar at-risk circumstances, the 2017 study revealed the amalgam of macro-, meso- and microlevel factors driving violent extremism in Africa, as well as sources of resilience that can prevent its spread. It concluded that effective responses to violent extremism require a multifaceted, development-focused approach, with development actors uniquely placed to address the structural drivers. It also highlighted the very localized and fast-changing nature of violent extremism, underscoring the importance of regular research to understand the evolution of its drivers and dynamics. Importantly, the 2017 study put in stark relief the question of how counter-terrorism and wider security functions of governments in at-risk environments conduct themselves with regard to human rights, due process and sensitivity to context. It thus underlined the United Nations 2016 Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, which acknowledged that the traditional "single-minded focus only on security measures and an utter disregard for human rights have often made things worse."

Despite the clear lessons on the limitations and risks of security-driven responses to violent extremism, militarized approaches have continued to predominate in sub-Saharan Africa over the past five years. Within the region, resources have increased for an array of multi-country military coalitions set up to conduct counter-terrorism operations. The international architecture for counter-terrorism has also expanded with the creation of more dedicated mechanisms, despite the limited evidence that such security-driven militarized responses, by themselves, would be effective in contributing to sustainable peace, security and stability. Indeed, despite more than a decade of security-driven responses underpinned by huge international investment, VE groups have

extended their reach and impact markedly in the Sahel region and elsewhere on the African continent.

Against this backdrop of the surge in violent extremism in sub-Saharan Africa, and the continued prioritization of security-driven responses, UNDP initiated a follow-up study, *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement* in 2020. The research was developed to strengthen and refine the evidence base established in 2017, as well as to update and expand the scope of the research, tracking variations in relation to the findings of the first report. The objectives were to further analyse the changing nature of violent extremism in sub-Saharan Africa and take stock of efforts to prevent its spread since the 2017 study. In addition to analysing the drivers, ‘tipping points’ and accelerators affecting recruitment to VE groups, the new research also explores pathways away from extremism.

The new study delves deeper into the pathways away from violent extremism, revealing factors that may push or pull recruits to disengage from VE groups

The *Journey to Extremism 2.0* report focuses on eight countries across sub-Saharan Africa: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia and Sudan. It reflects the life journeys of 2,196 interviewees, three times as many respondents as in the 2017 study. This includes over 1,000 former members of VE groups, both individuals who joined voluntarily and those who were forcibly recruited. Importantly, the sample also includes a significantly higher number of female interviewees (552). While more research is required on the experiences of women and girls in relation to violent extremism, the gender-disaggregated findings of this study shed light on women’s and men’s divergent pathways to recruitment. The report presents the interview data in relation to the changing nature of violent extremism in sub-Saharan Africa and efforts to address it, providing a complementary analysis of the broader international policy context, trends in aid flows and responses to violent extremism.

Building on the methodology of the 2017 study, the new research further illuminates the complex pathways that lead some individuals to join VE groups, while others in similar circumstances do not. Refracted through the personal perspectives and lived experiences of the young women and

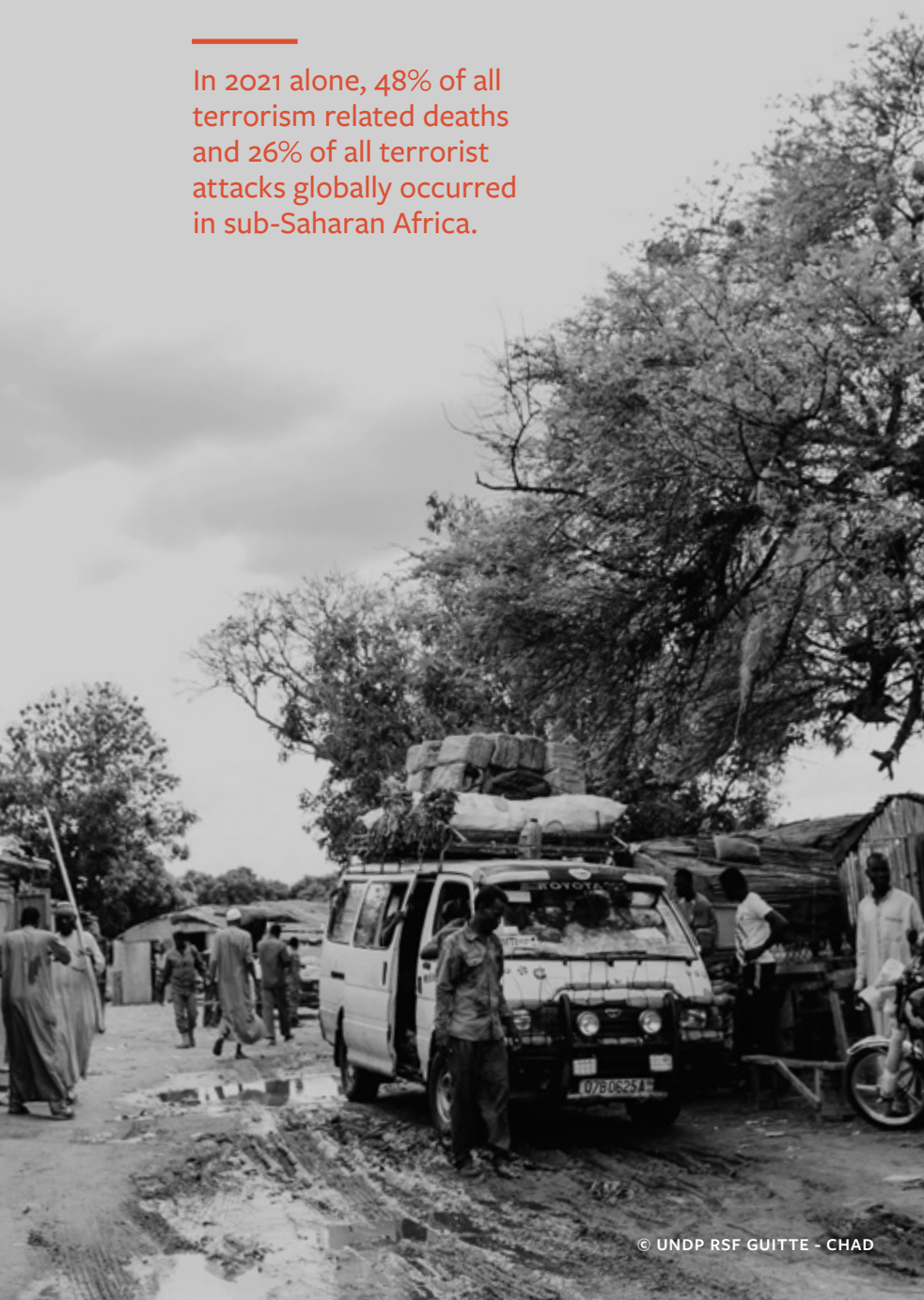
men interviewed, it constructs an aggregate view of the relative significance of various factors. Like the first study, it focuses on four broad clusters – upbringing and education, economic factors, religion and ideologies, and state and citizenship – and examines how they interact and influence an individual’s life journey. It also explores the prevalence and nature of ‘tipping point’ events that may ultimately cause an individual to join a VE group.

In addition, the new study delves deeper into the pathways away from violent extremism, revealing factors that may push or pull recruits to disengage from VE groups. Expanding the metaphor of a life journey and comparing the trajectories of those who chose to leave the VE group through surrender and amnesty with those who were arrested, it introduces the notion of a ‘turning point’. This refers to a shift in attitudes and represents that point when a recruit no longer believes in the aims or approach of the VE group and is thus open to disengagement. It acknowledges, however, that even with such a shift in attitudes, many reasons – having to do with fear of repercussions and practical circumstances – may make it difficult for a recruit to leave the group.

The Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement report will strengthen UNDP’s evidence-based, development-focused approach to preventing violent extremism in Africa. Specifically, it will inform the design of the second iteration of UNDP’s flagship multiyear regional project, Preventing and Responding to Violent Extremism in Africa and Arab States: A Development Approach (2022-2025). Beyond this, it aims to inform and promote action by a wide range of stakeholders engaged in preventing violent extremism at local, national, regional and international levels.

The evidence presented reaffirms the need for a fundamental change of approach to addressing violent extremism in Africa and suggests a series of practical implications for policy and programming to help bring about that change. The key findings are presented below, followed by a summary of the implications for programming and policy.

In 2021 alone, 48% of all terrorism related deaths and 26% of all terrorist attacks globally occurred in sub-Saharan Africa.



Key findings

The *Journey to Extremism 2.0* report reaffirms many of the findings and insights revealed by UNDP's 2017 study on the wide range of factors that may influence an individual's journey to extremism. It deepens our understanding of a process through which structural factors intersect with individual experiences to inculcate a unique worldview on matters of politics, religion and ideology and that directs the individual towards or away from the path of violent extremism.

While for the most part, the new study reinforces the earlier findings, it also reveals some significant variations. These are reflective of the changing nature and context in which VE groups evolve and expand their footprint on the continent. They also reflect shifts over time in perceptions towards the state and the social contract between citizen and the state, as local capacities, despite enormous resilience, are being tested in situations where incomplete progress towards development and missed opportunities reverberate.

If left unchecked, these findings speak to the 'ripeness' of violent extremism in Africa, which threatens to stunt development prospects for generations to come and curtail hard-won development gains.

Pathways to recruitment

1.

Vulnerability to violent extremism is shaped by conditions of geographic location, childhood experiences and education

Isolation, remoteness and lack of exposure to others are significant factors in shaping early conditions that may render individuals susceptible to violent extremism later in life

Similar to the 2017 study, most individuals who later joined VE groups grew up in some of the most remote and peripheral areas, suffering from inter-generational socio-economic marginalization and underdevelopment. They were also statistically significantly more likely to have had less exposure to individuals from other interethnic and religious groups. 53 percent of reference group respondents claimed to have had friends from other religions growing up, this proportion was only 40 percent for voluntary recruits. In addition, they were considerably more inclined to later perceive their religion to be under threat, as well as to express negative views about religious diversity. As such, this study corroborates earlier findings on the salience of remoteness as one of the factors in a child's upbringing that shape underlying threat perceptions. This may lead to a hardening of attitudes towards others later and, thus, create the conditions that influence the trajectory to future recruitment.

Perceptions of childhood unhappiness, as well as a perceived lack of parental involvement and interest in a child's upbringing, increase the likelihood of joining a VE group

Echoing the findings of the first *Journey to Extremism* research, perceptions of childhood unhappiness and lack of parental involvement are associated with a higher likelihood of voluntary recruitment. Similarly, higher levels of childhood happiness and parental involvement emerge strongly as a source of resilience. All else being equal, a one-point increase in the childhood happiness rating decreases the odds of voluntary recruitment by around 10 percent. A one-point increase in the parental involvement rating decreases the odds of voluntary recruitment by around

25 percent, consistent with the findings of the 2017 study. This suggests that an individual's journey to violent extremism can be seen to originate, at least in part, in the child's unfulfilled need for belonging and connectedness, which underscores the importance of the family and environment in which the child is raised as a critical source of resilience.

Access to education, and its duration, can bolster resilience to violent extremism

Like the 2017 study, this dataset unequivocally confirms the significance of education as a resilience factor. Consistent with the 2017 study, the journey to extremism is found to be significantly influenced by a lack of even basic education. Low levels of education were found to be more widespread among voluntary recruits (59 percent) than the reference group (33 percent). Lack of education was further found to affect the pace in which recruitment occurs. Recruits who joined a VE group within only a month of introduction had four years of schooling on average, compared to almost seven years (6.8 years) among those who joined more slowly. Education also proved to be a prominent source of resilience: all else being equal, an additional year of schooling reduces the likelihood of voluntary recruitment by 13 percent. Additional years of education are thus associated with a lower likelihood of violent extremism.

2.

Religion exerts a dual power in the journey to extremism: it is both a potent vector for the mobilization of grievances but also represents an important source of resilience

Rather than emerging as a 'first response' in explaining recruitment, religion is revealed as a powerful touchstone for mobilizing context-based grievances and identity

Contrary to the first study, in which 40 percent of respondents pointed to 'religious ideas of the group' as the primary reason for voluntary recruitment, less than half (17 percent) identified religion as a key driver. Men were more inclined to perceive it as an influential factor, compared to women, who rated it as a less salient factor. A discernibly lower proportion of voluntary recruits perceived religious diversity to 'be a good thing' (54 percent), compared to 82 percent of the reference group, suggesting the success of extremist narratives in hardening social and religious attitudes. Conversely, the effect of not perceiving one's

religion to be under threat decreases the likelihood of voluntary recruitment by 48 to 50 percent. This contrast with the 2017 study which found no observable variation. Moreover, voluntary recruits were statistically more likely to perceive their religion to be under threat compared to the reference group in this study. The pull of VE groups providing ‘a sense of belonging’ was further found to be a statistically significant predictor of voluntary recruitment into VE groups. This suggests that when religion operates as a powerful expression of individual and group identity and offers a way to channel existing grievances and perceived threats, the likelihood of recruitment increases.

**Religious education
and religious literacy
constitute key
protective factors
against violent
extremism**

Distinguishing clearly between individual perceptions about radical religious ideologies as a driver to extremism on the one hand, and actual religious education and literacy levels on the other, the findings show that individuals who later joined a VE group voluntarily were more likely to have received fewer years of religious education than their reference group counterparts. They were also more likely to join at a greater speed than those who received higher levels of religious education. A significant proportion of voluntary recruits acknowledged that they either don't read religious texts themselves, but rely on intermediaries, or have no or limited understanding of the texts, rendering them more vulnerable to the influence of imported views and exposure to extremist ideas. In contrast, higher levels of religious education proved to be associated with a lower likelihood of voluntary recruitment. The findings resonate with the findings from the first *Journey to Extremism* research, which challenge globally mounting popular narratives that conflate religious ideologies with extremist behaviour. The findings further highlight the value of religious education and religious literacy as a crucial source of resilience in countering extremist narratives, consistent with the first study.

**“WE WERE TOLD WE WILL GET MONEY AND WIVES WHEN WE JOIN THE GROUP.
WE WERE TOLD WE WILL GO TO HEAVEN WHEN WE DIE IN BATTLE.”**

Ibrahim, 23 years old, Nigeria

3. Economic incentives are key to understand drivers to violent extremism

**The hope of
employment is cited
as the primary driver
of recruitment,
reflecting generalized
grievances of socio-
economic injustice and
marginalization**

The *Journey to Extremism* research again underscores the relevance of economic factors as drivers of recruitment. Twenty-five percent of voluntary recruits cited ‘employment opportunities’ as their primary reason for joining, particularly among the sample’s male respondents. Yet, contrary to the 2017 study and widespread assumptions regarding youth unemployment as a driver of violent extremism, no significant correlation was found between unemployment and susceptibility to violent extremism: 73 percent of voluntary recruits expressed frustration with the government in terms of providing employment opportunities, compared to 71 percent of the reference group. Thus, the study finds a generalized sense of economic hardship and deprivation in the outlook of all respondents, further underpinned by grievances animated by the shortcomings of the state itself.

**Economic incentives
converge with gender
roles and identities**

The *Journey to Extremism* further highlights how seemingly material incentives converge with gender norms and roles. While male respondents cited employment as the main factor, female respondents most frequently referred to the influence of family, including their husbands, as the primary driver of this decision. On average, male voluntary recruits stated that they earned significantly less prior to joining, compared to those recruited by force. Those who followed the violent extremism trajectory more quickly, were also more likely to be married and, thus, bear key responsibilities within the family. These findings further illustrate how economic dependency, traditional gender roles and the pressure of community, together with grievances associated with lived realities of vulnerability and underemployment, converge and may affect recruitment patterns in different ways.

4. A broken social contract provides fertile ground for recruitment

Widespread lack of trust in government and its institutions reveals a much more fractured social contract between the state and its citizens

While the 2017 study found limited confidence in, and grievances towards, government to be associated with the highest incidence of violent extremism in Africa, no statistically significant variation of ‘trust in government’ was observed in this dataset. Rather, the study found low levels of trust in government institutions, particularly in security actors, and low levels of democratic participation in the outlook of all respondents. On average, voluntary recruits exhibited only marginally lower levels of trust. The new dataset thus reveals a much more fractured social contract between the state and its citizens than previously. This may warrant the very real prospect of an even greater spread of violent extremism on the continent than in recent years, with further associated development backsliding and devastation.

Deep-seated perceptions of impunity and distrust in security actors continue to fuel grievances leading to violent extremism

Grievances against security actors, notably the police and military, were particularly evident in this data sample. Sixty-two percent of voluntary recruits reported having ‘little or no trust’ in the police, with 61 percent of the reference group responding similarly. Similarly, 59 percent expressed a similar perception towards the military, compared to 46 percent of the reference group. These findings suggest deep-seated profound divides between communities and security actors, which is known to offer fertile ground for recruitment into VE groups. These findings highlight the urgent need to improve the quality and accountability of institutions across service delivery areas such as security.

“I EXPERIENCED THE UNFAIR ATTACKS AND KILLINGS OF MY SISTERS AND BROTHERS BY THE GOVERNMENT”

Ali, 25 years old, Somalia

Widespread dissatisfaction with state service provision is prevalent, particularly regarding employment

Contrary to the 2017 study, which found lower levels of satisfaction with government service provision among recruits than among reference group counterparts, this dataset did not identify a statistically significant variation in respondents' outlook. Thus, dissatisfaction with service delivery does not emerge as a significant predictor of the likelihood of voluntary recruitment. Nevertheless, the new findings clearly reveal widespread negative perceptions in the outlook of all groups, especially regarding employment, security and education. A striking 73 percent of voluntary recruits stated that they thought the government was doing a bad job in providing employment, with the reference group posting an equally high proportion of 71 percent. While both reference group and voluntary recruits were almost equally divided in their perceptions of the role of the state in providing everyday security, male recruits held more critical views than females.

VE groups hold increasing appeal as alternatives to the state

Distrust of the government and dissatisfaction with state provision of services underscore the appeal of VE groups that present themselves as proto-states and alternative service providers. Through contextual data from Mali and Somalia the Journey to Extremism 2.0 research helped to explain perceptions of the role of VE groups as service providers in key areas, such as mediation of local conflicts, justice provision and everyday security. In Mali, a significant proportion of the voluntary recruits pointed to the appeal of VE groups in mediating local conflicts (70 percent) and everyday security (71 percent). In Somalia, 62 percent of voluntary recruits pointed to the role of VE groups in ensuring everyday security and 58 percent identified their role in providing justice. While more research is needed, this provides some insights into the process whereby VE groups exploit existing governance deficits and draw on the progressive delegitimization of the formal state to mobilize support and tap into localized grievances and narratives of victimization and injustice.

Local actors are more trusted than state authorities

Religious and community leaders earned significantly higher levels of trust, although these levels were lower among voluntary recruits, consistent with the 2017 study. A significant majority of all respondents favoured religious leaders, with

80 percent of voluntary recruits reporting ‘some’ or ‘a lot of trust’, compared to 84 percent of reference group respondents. This compares to community leaders, with up to 75 percent of reference group respondents and 63 percent of voluntary recruits indicating that they had ‘some’ or ‘a lot of trust’ in those leaders. Consistent with the 2017 study, this underscores the importance of proximity factors and local actors as first responders in areas affected by the threat of violent extremism characterized by a limited state presence. This further confirms the crucial role that religious leaders and faith-based organizations can play in countering violent extremist narratives and strengthening cohesiveness.

5. The tipping point

The absence of a ‘tipping point’ reduces the risk of recruitment significantly

The *Journey to Extremism* research put forward the notion of a transformative trigger that pushes individuals decisively from the at-risk category to join a VE group. Recognizing radicalization as a highly socialized and dialectical process, influenced by a confluence of factors and conditions, this study examines the extent to which an individual’s decision to join was influenced by the occurrence of a specific trigger event, also noted as a ‘tipping point’, as well as the statistical significance of such events. It reveals that as many as 48 percent of respondents stated that they had experienced such a tipping point. For someone who had not, the likelihood of voluntary recruitment was sharply reduced by 40 and 50 percent compared to someone who had experienced such an event.

Government action, accompanied by human rights abuses, continues to trigger, fuel and accelerate recruitment towards violent extremism

Seventy-one percent of the 48 percent who described having experienced a trigger event, cited government action, including the killing and arrest of family or friends as the specific event that ultimately impelled them to join a VE group, similar to the 2017 study. Trigger events were also found to be a significant accelerator of recruitment, with higher levels of anger and fear featuring more prominently among those who joined more quickly, compared to those who joined more slowly and reported primarily feeling hope. Thus, consistent with the previous *Journey*

to *Extremism* research, this highlights how recruitment into VE groups presents a unique ‘pull’ opportunity for change and an opportunity to rebel against the status quo. These findings further illustrate that, in most cases, state action, accompanied by a sharp escalation of human rights abuses, appears to be the prominent factor finally pushing individuals into VE groups in Africa.

6.

The recruitment process

Joining a VE group reflects the influence of social networks and pressures

Forty percent of voluntary recruits joined a VE group within one month of their first encounter with the group and 67 percent joined within one year. The data confirm the significance of factors related to the socialized nature of the recruitment process, notably the influence of peer networks and family. A majority (45 percent) of voluntary recruits joined a VE group with friends, while 15 percent joined with family and 16 percent joined alone. Of those who joined within a month of introduction, a higher proportion of recruits joined with a friend (58 percent), compared to 22 percent of quick recruits who joined alone. Moreover, when examining these patterns by gender, male recruits were more likely to join with friends (61 percent), while female recruits tended to join with their family members (50 percent). Most male recruits were also introduced to the group by friends (50 percent), while most females were introduced through their husbands (46 percent). This difference likely reflects the gendered roles and responsibilities within family structures and networks in the countries under review.

Higher internet usage – in areas with limited internet penetration - is associated with less susceptibility to violent extremism

A statistically significant association exists between low levels of internet use and the likelihood of voluntary recruitment. Voluntary recruits who never used or lacked access to the internet also joined more quickly than others. Among ‘quick recruits’, traditional media such as radio was further cited as the main source of information after word of mouth. They were also more likely to join with friends than alone, suggesting the association between lower internet usage and greater vulnerability to peer influence

in the recruitment process. Women report a lower degree of access to the internet across the voluntary and reference group, compared to men. This differs from the 2017 study, which found that voluntary group respondents reported a 9 percent higher use rate compared to reference group counterparts. It suggested that as connectivity rates improve, so will the potential for online recruitment, which offers a far wider reach than localized processes. Indeed, recognizing the limitations of online influence in peripheral areas where internet penetration is low, VE groups have adapted their strategies to combine both offline and online recruitment tactics to be able to reach those previously unreachable.

Voluntary recruits indicated lower levels of participation and awareness of preventing violent extremism (PVE) initiatives than their reference group counterparts

A significantly high proportion of voluntary recruits stated that they were not aware of any preventive initiatives upon joining (70 percent), compared to those who were (30 percent). Reference group respondents indicated a higher level of awareness and participation in such initiatives when compared with voluntary recruits. Nevertheless, the regression analyses did not find a statistically significant impact of awareness and participation in PVE activities on the likelihood of voluntary recruitment in any of the econometric models. This differs from the first study, which found that awareness of PVE initiatives slowed the pace of recruitment.

**“I DIDN’T SEE THE PICTURE THAT I DRAW IN MIND BEFORE I JOINED
— I WAS TOLD BY THE FRIEND THAT WOULD BE THE BEST DECISION YOU
HAVE EVER MADE, PLEASE JOIN THIS GREAT CAUSE AND YOU WILL SEE
THE DIFFERENCES WHEN YOU REACHED THERE, BUT I ACTUALLY FOUND
NOTHING AND I CONSIDERED MYSELF TO BE LUCKY AS I AM STILL ALIVE”**

Ali, 31 years old, Somalia



**“I WAS LOOKING FOR WHERE I COULD PRACTICE FREEDOM
SINCE I COULD NOT GET THAT IN MY FAMILY. THE SAME
THING I EXPERIENCED IN THE GROUP WHERE I FELT LIKE
I WAS IN A PRISON. I WAS NEVER GIVEN CONSIDERATION
TO MY OPINIONS AND WANTS SUCH AS MONEY”**

Hawa, 26 years old, Somalia

Pathways to disengagement

8.

Drivers of disengagement.

Unmet expectations and disillusionment with the group's actions and ideology offer critical entry points for voluntary disengagement

Unmet expectations were prevalent among those who left the VE group voluntarily

Seventy-seven percent of those who chose to leave said their expectations were not met, compared with 60 percent of those arrested. The relationship between voluntary disengagement and unmet or unfulfilled expectations was found to be statistically significant, suggesting an association between unmet initial expectations and the decision to leave the VE group voluntarily.

Economic incentives feature prominently in the decision to disengage

Sixty-two percent of individuals captured through arrest stated that they had been paid while a member of the VE group, compared with only 49 percent of those who disengaged voluntarily. The variation in the outlook of respondents was further found to be statistically significant, highlighting an association between lower levels of payment and voluntary disengagement. The research also found that those who joined quickly expressed greater disappointment over monetary rewards (42 percent) compared to those who joined within a year (32 percent). These findings differ fundamentally from the 2017 study, which did not find economic factors as prominent a factor for disengagement as for recruitment.

Disillusionment with the group's ideology and/or actions is key in triggering a turning point

When examining the salience of factors influencing the ultimate decision to leave, the outcomes were strikingly behavioural and ideological, relative to other factors such as mistreatment and hunger. Describing a disconnect between the group's initial promises and ideas and its actual practices, 68 percent identified 'no longer agreeing with the

actions of the group', including the killing of civilians, as the most significant factor. Sixty percent of those who voluntarily disengaged identified 'no longer believing in ideology of the VE group' as the second most influential factor prompting them to leave. Eighty-five percent of female recruits reported that no longer believing in the ideology of the VE group was a major influence on their decision to leave, compared with 62 percent for males. These findings highlight the importance of addressing underlying values and beliefs underpinning violent extremist behaviours as a pathway to sustainably bolster resilience, as well as the underlying grievances that give rise to a cognitive shift and receptiveness towards VE groups and extremist ideas.

Those who disengage voluntarily are less likely to re-join and recruit others, while those arrested acknowledge that they intend to re-engage in violent extremist activity

When examining respondents' intent to possibly re-engage with a VE group, a higher proportion of those who disengaged voluntarily expressed an intent not to re-engage in such (65 percent), compared to individuals captured through arrest, who expressed a much greater intent to reengage, with the objective of 'recruiting more people to join' (40 percent). For those arrested through capture, the most salient factor motivating them to reengage was the VE groups' 'providing a sense of belonging' (35) and 'wanting to seek justice' (32 percent). These findings may reflect that those captured through arrest hold more positive views of the use of violence as a legitimate means to address grievances and to achieve social change, contrary to those who disengage voluntarily. This further underscores the relevance of behaviourally informed approaches to prevention.

“THEY PROMISED ME TO GET ALL WHAT I WANT WHEN I JOINED THE GROUP, EVENTUALLY I END UP LACKING A LOT OF NECESSITY.”

Umar, 18 years old, Nigeria

9.

The disengagement process

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Government incentives and amnesty programs have an impact on disengagement

Most respondents who disengaged voluntarily from a VE group stated that government incentives and amnesty programmes influenced their decision to leave. Similarly, awareness of such amnesty and reintegration programmes supporting disengagement also emerged as crucial in the disengagement process.

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Disengagement has a cascading effect

Just as joining a VE group is a socialized process, so is the decision to disengage, closely linked to the decision by family, friends and community members to leave. Males were far more likely to state that they left with friends (42 percent)), while the most frequent response among female recruits was that they left with their husband (31 percent), followed by other family members (29 percent). This contrasts with the very few who decided to leave alone. These findings underscore the significance of considering the entire social ecology of peer networks, social bonding and identity as vital aspects of disengagement processes, while reinforcing behavioural dimensions that may bolster individuals' resilience.

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A gender-sensitive lens is key to empower communities at large

While the research revealed the pathways to and from extremism as highly gendered, the primary drivers influencing the decision to join appeared to be strikingly less ideological for women than for men, relative to socialized factors and reliance on the family and husband. This underscores the potential of women in curbing ideological narratives known to be a touchstone for mobilizing context-based grievances. Women were also less likely to be aware of PVE initiatives compared to men, yet of those participating in such initiatives, they indicated a higher level of participation in both the primary and reference groups, compared to men, further underscoring women's important and often untapped potential in empowering communities in PVE initiatives.

“I JOINED BECAUSE I FELT FRUSTRATED WITH THE CONDITIONS OF EVERYDAY LIFE, THE LIFE THAT I LEAD. I WAS SO POOR AND VULNERABLE, WITH A FAMILY TO TAKE CARE OF. I THOUGHT THAT IN THE GROUP I WOULD HAVE A BETTER STATUS AS A SCHOLAR, I WOULD BE BETTER OFF AND IN THE WORST CASE SCENARIO I WOULD DIE AS A MARTYR”

Mustapha, 39 years old, Niger

Implications of the research

Given the evidence this study generated, what measures can be taken, both through programming and in the policy sphere, to prevent men and women from joining VE groups? The following section distils key implications of the findings of the Journey to Extremism 2.0 report. Just as the latest data reinforce many of the findings of the original 2017 study, these implications reaffirm many of those identified five years ago and suggest important new areas.

For programming

Programming implications are presented in relation to key findings from the data.

Upbringing and education

The *Journey to Extremism 2.0* research illustrated that peripheral and borderlands communities are associated with specific vulnerabilities, often suffering from generations of socio-economic marginalization and neglect. Despite their resilience, these communities are found to be more isolated and have less exposure to others, with more limited prospects in development terms and lower internet penetration. The new research highlights how the nature of childhood experiences and upbringing shape the extent to which an individual subsequently feels a sense of identity and belonging and how its absence increases the likelihood of seeking it through membership in a VE group. While the evidence for such psychological factors is difficult to adduce, this points to the value of psychosocially-informed interventions, among others.

- **Bolster** efforts to support community resilience through a whole-of-society approach with targeted development-focused programs for at-risk peripheral and borderlands areas.

- **Design** age-appropriate PVE interventions that address the specific vulnerabilities of certain groups of youth, including children and adolescents.
- **Support** community-led and culturally-sensitive outreach on good parenting, gender awareness and domestic violence and revise school curricula and teacher training to give greater priority to citizenship and civic engagement, respect for diversity and critical thinking.
- **Invest** in young people's capacities, agency and leadership (outside of formal school structures), through, for example, mentoring opportunities and funding support to youth organizations with a particular focus on empowering young women and strengthening youth engagement in PVE projects, including identifying youth PVE champions (both former recruits and those who resisted recruitment), and enabling them to share their knowledge and experiences.

Religious ideologies

Religion emerges as an important vehicle for the mobilization of grievances but also represents an important source of resilience. In particular, higher levels of religious education are found to be a preventive force and to slow the pace of recruitment. Greater religious diversity is further found to sharply reduce the likelihood of recruitment.

- **Support and amplify** the voices of religious leaders who preach tolerance and interfaith cohesion, while challenging misinterpretations of Islam, countering harmful narratives and promoting alternative messaging.
- **Capitalize** on the important role that religious teaching can play as a source of resilience, supporting increased religious literacy among at-risk groups.
- **Invest** in communityled governance systems that promote transparent and accountable leadership on religious affairs, including in areas such as the development of curricula in madrassas and engagement with parents on educational content.
- **Engage and include** religious leaders and women of faith in the development, implementation and monitoring of national and subnational PVE strategies.

Economic factors

Economic pressures are a central driver of extremism, reflecting multidimensional poverty and a lack of employment opportunities, as well as gender roles and expectations. However, a one-dimensional focus on vocational training and livelihood support will not alone yield sustainable outcomes, unless it can raise expectations and fulfil socio-economic hopes of sustainable employment and thus tackle underlying grievances of socio-economic deprivation and deep sentiments of injustice and marginalization that lead individuals to seek alternatives. The gender-disaggregated data related to economic drivers of recruitment suggest that decisions to join are not influenced by materialistic incentives alone, but also by socially constructed gendered roles related to expectations to roles and responsibilities within the family.

- **Invest** in economic regeneration of at-risk areas, including by upgrading infrastructure, prioritizing job creation and improving access to markets and financial services.
- **Provide** gender-sensitive income generation schemes for at-risk youth as well as long-term livelihood programmes and entrepreneurship training that integrates life skills, citizenship values and social cohesion.
- **Develop** strategies that provide economic incentives and alternatives for recruits, engaging wider communities to avoid the perception of rewarding those recruited.

State and citizenship

The profoundly fractured relationship between the state and citizens highlights the risk of a further expansion of violent extremism. Preventing this involves improving the quality of service provision and addressing governance deficits. It also calls for a fundamental reimagining of the social contract from the bottom up to ensure that it is accountable, legitimate and relevant in the eyes of the citizens it is meant to serve.

- **Improve** service delivery across security, justice and other basic services provided by the state, integrating citizen oversight and engagement as part of delivery.

- **Strengthen** oversight of state security actors by independent civilianled bodies, with clear accountability and sanctions for abuses, to fundamentally address and end impunity.
- **Reinvigorate** anti-corruption campaigns with a renewed emphasis on building state-citizen confidence and accountability and ending impunity for officials.
- **Design** national PVE action plans in a participatory fashion and integrate a wider sectoral focus on youth issues.
- **Invest** in greater resilience of democratic institutions and processes and support civic education processes.
- **Support** initiatives to reimagine the social contract and strengthen national identities, social cohesion and citizenship.

The tipping point

Many recruits experienced a ‘tipping point’, most commonly a government action or the killing or arrest of a friend or family member. The report finds that the absence of a ‘tipping point’ sharply reduces the likelihood of recruitment by between 40 and 50 percent, while the occurrence of a tipping point is confirmed as a prominent driver that fuels, catalyses and accelerates recruitment into VE groups. These abuses, and the underlying factors that give rise to such grievances, must be addressed and eliminated. To help alleviate psychological suffering and break these cycles of violence, mental health and psychosocial support measures should be integrated into PVE programming, as is occurring increasingly in peacebuilding.

- **Accelerate** the implementation of security sector reform processes tailored to the specific challenges of violent extremism that are grounded in international humanitarian law, standards and rights-based approaches and that integrate civic oversight and confidence-building mechanisms.
- **Support** effective oversight of state security actors by an independent, civilian-led body, with clear accountability and sanctions for abuses.
- **Support** confidence-building mechanisms and trust-building exchanges between local authorities (including security actors) and the communities they are meant to serve.

- **Integrate** mental health and psychosocial support into PVE programming, including support for community-led trauma counselling services.
- **Design** alternative/counter-messaging programmes contextualized to local, vernacular cultures and delivered through trusted local organizations, disseminated via SMS, radio and community centres.

The recruitment process

Despite the highly personalized aspects of an individual's pathway to violent extremism, this report confirms that recruitment is a highly socialized and gendered process that varies significantly for men and women. Moreover, contrary to widespread assumptions about online radicalization, higher internet usage is found to significantly decrease the likelihood of recruitment. Yet, in peripheral areas where internet penetration is lower, this involves a greater reliance on peer networks and thus underscores the importance of bolstering community resilience through offline messaging and traditional media.

- **Undertake** broader research into gender-disaggregated recruitment patterns to deepen the understanding of underlying pressures, expectations and incentives.
- **Develop** gender-sensitive PVE strategies and programming that apply a gender lens both to the analysis of the issues and framing of objectives and to design, implementation and monitoring.
- **Develop** gender-sensitive programming tailored to the specific exit pathways of women and girls.
- **Support** efforts to strengthen community resilience through radio and offline messaging.
- **Support** the design of alternative/counter-messaging programmes contextualized to local, vernacular cultures and deliver them through trusted local organizations via SMS, radio and community centres.

Drivers to disengagement: the turning point

Pathways from extremism require a fundamental shift in beliefs and values to yield sustainable outcomes. Disengagement is a highly localized process, where local actors and communities at large have important roles to play in strengthening resilience and sustaining behavioural change.

- **Support** efforts to reinforce and rebuild social bonds, promote a sense of belonging and offer an alternative identity that rejects violence as a way to address grievances, resolve conflict, express agency or pursue a goal.
- **Support** community-based reintegration and reconciliation efforts through community and locally-based organizations, including by leveraging the role of community leaders and communities, including peer networks and relationships.
- **Reinvigorate** prevention efforts to avoid a return to violence, including by acknowledging the legitimate grievances and structural, political and economic dynamics and risk factors that may have contributed to violent extremism at the outset.
- **Work** with former recruits to develop and communicate narratives designed to disincentivize young people regarding the economic benefits of joining VE groups.
- **Develop** strategies that provide economic incentives and alternatives for recruits by engaging wider communities to avoid being seen as rewarding the recruits.

“THE JUSTICE AND FAIRNESS AND EQUITY THAT WAS PREACHED TO US WAS NOT THE REALITY OF THINGS IN THE BUSH.”

Sadiq, 24 years old, Cameroon

The disengagement process

The research highlights the socialized dimension of disengagement processes, but also underscores the significance of strengthening the awareness and availability of such exit pathways.

- **Scale up** amnesty and other exit opportunities for disillusioned recruits and invest in comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration services. These include behavioural and mental health and psychosocial support mechanisms that can help prevent individuals from experiencing feelings of isolation and alienation in the disengagement process that can, in turn, contribute to recidivism.
- **Support** awareness-raising efforts and accessibility of amnesty and disengagement programmes, including through trust-building measures to link national and subregional interventions to the community level.
- **Develop** gender-sensitive disengagement PVE strategies and programming that apply a gender lens both to the analysis of the issues and framing of objectives and to the design, implementation and monitoring process.
- **Leverage** the perspectives of peer networks and structures, including former VE group members as voices for alternative/counter-messaging, including by providing alternative narratives and developing peer-to-peer learning and education programmes.

**“I WANTED TO HAVE A NORMAL LIFE JUST LIKE OTHER PEOPLE,
LIFE FULL OF FREEDOM IS WHAT INSPIRED ME EXIT THE GROUP.”**

Baana, 21 years old, Somalia

For policy

The programming implications suggest practical strategies and interventions required primarily at national and subnational levels to prevent violent extremism. However, programming will be hampered and undermined unless the broader national and international policy context is conducive to the multifaceted, development-focused approach required. While the risks of security-driven responses and the need for a development-focused approach may be recognized more widely, this has not yet translated into the necessary reorientation and reprioritization of international policy and resources. Therefore, urgent action is required in the policy sphere, both at national and international levels, to reverse this trend and prioritize preventive development-focused approaches. Drawing on the broader context analysis for the research, the following policy implications emerge.

Realizing the promise: towards effective oversight of human rights compliance, rule of law and accountability for militarized and state-centric counter-terrorism responses

The *Journey to Extremism 2.0* report highlights widespread and generalized distrust and grievances towards the police and military. It provides robust evidence that the conduct of state security agencies may act as a prominent accelerator, driver and 'tipping point' for recruitment in the journey to extremism, rather than the reverse. These findings clearly show the need for more effective oversight of human rights compliance, rule of law and accountability by state security actors.

- **Exercise** effective oversight over and accountability for human rights and rule of law compliance in militarized, state-centric counter-terrorism responses - contingent upon the strengthening and implementation of systematic monitoring and compliance with human rights standards and the rule of law, extending beyond state security actors.
- **Ensure** regular reviews of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy as a robust and independent international oversight mechanism to more effectively assess and mitigate harm from counter-terrorism measures, including with respect to gender equality and civic space.

Reimagining and reinvigorating the social contract from the bottom-up

The new study points to a much more fractured and divided relationship between state and citizen, reflected in part by the sense of apathy characterizing the outlook of all respondents regarding the impact of elections and the possibility that they could bring positive change. This reflects a shift in levels of confidence in the democratic process, but also mirrors more divided and fractured perceptions of the state in the area of service provision and trust in state and institutions. It confirms the need for a reinvigorated approach that builds on people's agency, creates avenues for enhanced community resilience, and restores the social contract between citizens and the state, as a foundation for sustaining peace.

- **Invest** in sustained support for bottom-up democracy-building, including by increasing the visibility and accessibility of mechanisms for political participation and civic engagement in local and national development agendas.
- **Develop and strengthen** policies that ensure effective oversight, tailored and adequate development-based responses, particularly in the area of service-provision, anti-corruption and accountability, to challenge the emergence of VE groups as proto-state competitors for authority and legitimacy.
- **Refocus** agency-focused, human security approaches in PVE programming as an effective tool and framework for addressing underlying inequalities, grievances and root causes of violent extremism, which enhances space for solidarity as people are better able to reason about, strategize and participate in actions that transform society.
- **Create space and opportunities** for trust-building measures between state and society to reimagine a social contract fit for sub-Saharan Africa in the 21st century, including through efforts to strengthen national identities, social cohesion and citizenship.

Strengthening state legitimacy through improved service delivery, quality and accountability of state service provision

The *Journey to Extremism 2.0* findings reinforce the call for a revived commitment by states to upgrade the quality and accountability of institutions across service delivery areas at the national and subnational levels, particularly in at-risk areas as a critical avenue for strengthening state legitimacy and accountability.

- **Upscale** investments and **ensure** improved quality and accountability of state services as a fundamental and, ultimately, more effective means of addressing violent extremism compared to standalone security-focused interventions.
- **Ensure** sustained support for the democratic process at sub-national and local levels, including through bottom-up democracy-building, going beyond the tendency to focus attention and resources on national election cycles.
- **Invest and support** efforts to strengthen the technical capacity in state service provision and delivery.

Embedding a conflict-sensitive approach in efforts to address violent extremism

Violent extremism is inextricably entwined with conflict dynamics, both local and national. Thus, interventions to prevent or counter violent extremism will inevitably have an impact on conflict dynamics. The research highlights a widespread lack of trust in governments, particularly in state security forces. In this context, international support for state-centric strategies, including to strengthen state security forces, risks reinforcing power structures.

- **Embed** conflict-sensitive approaches in efforts to address violent extremism with a focus on putting people at the heart and building capacity to analyse, evaluate and mitigate the risks of potential harmful interactions between responses to violent extremism, local populations and conflict dynamics through a human security approach.

- **Strengthen** analysis and practical guidance on conflict-sensitive approaches to countering and preventing violent extremism to ensure that harmful impacts are minimized while building upon peacebuilding opportunities.
- **Support** multi-stakeholder strategies to counter and prevent violent extremism, rather than those that focus exclusively on state capacity-building.

Up-scaling support for localized, community-based support to PVE

The *Journey to Extremism 2.0* research highlights the localized dynamics that shape an individual's pathway to joining a VE group, while also revealing how such groups tap into and exploit such localized grievances. This suggests a need for a critical shift in confronting the root causes of violent extremism beyond short-term standalone military means towards upscaling complementary community-based and development-based support for bottom-up conflict transformation and peacebuilding approaches that recognize the importance of countervailing preventive efforts at the local level. This also calls for a corresponding shift in partnerships with local actors.

- **Up-scale** support for localized community-based support to PVE initiatives and ensure more long-term, sustainable funding and resources to community-based preventive approaches.
- **Strengthen and reinvigorate** partnerships with civil society and community groups which are based on fortifying local ownership and their engagement in PVE initiatives in all areas of the design, implementation and evaluation of national and international strategies.
- **Ensure sustained** support and Investments in gender-sensitive PVE response with a specific focus and resources dedicated to ensuring the inclusion of women and girls' perspectives in all areas of the design, implementation and evaluation of interventions.

Integrating PVE within peacebuilding and sustainable development policy frameworks

The importance of development approaches in tackling the causes and consequences of violent extremism has gained increasing recognition. Despite this – and notwithstanding limited evidence of the success of security-driven responses over the past five years – most international attention and resources for addressing violent extremism in Africa continue to be directed towards stand-alone security-focused or conventional humanitarian interventions, as evidenced by this study.

- **Strengthen** the evidence-base and analytical foundation of PVE approaches based on comprehensive analysis on root and proximate causes of conflict.
- **Design and deliver** joined-up responses, rather than pursuing disconnected PVE and peacebuilding strategies that may undermine each other.
- **Integrate and embed** prevention of violent extremism in peacebuilding and sustainable development policy frameworks.
- **Bolster and promote** multi-faceted preventive approaches to violent, with long-term development goals at its core, rather than a narrow security-focused response.

Recalibrating the commitment to investing in cost-effective prevention and long-term development

The *Journey to Extremism 2.0* study shows that investments are still predominantly focused towards reactive and security-dominated responses. This is crowding out support for preventive and long-term development as support for peacebuilding and PVE initiatives has plateaued or, even, decreased in recent years to approximately 2 percent. Investments should be reoriented towards complementary prevention and peacebuilding efforts which have proven to have a positive return at 16:1. Thus, every US\$1 invested in peacebuilding could save \$16 on the cost of conflict and violence.

- **Reprioritize** international policy and resources towards addressing the root causes and conditions of underdevelopment that drive individuals into recruitment.

- **Recalibrate commitments to reorient** investments towards complementary prevention and peacebuilding efforts to harness multiplier effects and reap peace dividends.
- **Ensure and oversee** that international development budgets avoid rebranding and conflating PVE efforts with interventions to counter terror and extremism (CTE) and counter violent extremism (CVE), securitizing aid and instrumentalizing efforts to counter and prevent violent extremism in contested political contexts.

Recalibrate commitments to reorient investments towards complementary prevention and peacebuilding efforts to harness multiplier effects and reap peace dividends.



The *Journey to Extremism 2.0* report is the product of an intensive two-year research process, undertaken in areas of sub-Saharan Africa that have been most directly affected by violent extremist activity. The 2,196 interviewees represent a nearly 70 percent increase in the number of respondents compared with the 2017 study.

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