



Civil Society Dialogue Network Policy Meeting

Preventing/countering violent extremism more effectively:

Experience from the ground

Brussels, Monday 23 October 2017

Outcome Document

Background

Preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) is a high-priority policy area, for which the European Union (EU) has a range of external action tools at its disposal. P/CVE policies are largely gender-blind, but their implementation is highly gendered in practice. This may hamper the identification of root causes and reduce the effectiveness of policy responses and contribute to counter-productive outcomes in the longer term in societies at risk of violent extremism and/or radicalisation, and may also damage the EU's credibility as an external actor.

On 23 October 2017, the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), organised a [Civil Society Dialogue Network \(CSDN\)](#) meeting between 44 practitioners from civil society and EU officials to identify the opportunities for making P/CVE policies and programmes more effective.

The participants considered how EU P/CVE policies have integrated the experiences, interests and needs of different men and different women in analysis, policy-making and in implementation; and the impacts of P/CVE policies in relevant (third) countries, particularly from Tunisia, Jordan, Nigeria, Niger and Kosovo, including from the perspective of different population groups. The meeting generated recommendations of concrete ways to strengthen the EU's ability to deliver on P/CVE policy commitments in policy and in practice. These are captured in this document.

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule and did not seek consensus.

Note on Terms

The meeting recognised that the discourses surrounding P/CVE and the overlapping area of counter-terrorism is often problematic. They can be manipulated to discredit civil society and opposition activists, and may alienate population groups. "Radical Islam" is particularly problematic. The relationship between radicalisation/VE, geopolitics and the EU's role (or non-role) in these, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region were noted.

Participants noted that the EU should clarify how it understands P/CVE in policy and programming. Rather than refine this (contested) concept, the meeting focused on alternative objectives (particularly ensuring a robust evidence base for policies and programmes, inclusive governance, anti-corruption, shared sense of belonging) and *what works* in practice.

Key findings and recommendations

The European Union, when considering its responses to VE, should take into account the following lessons learnt in its policies, programming, instruments and practice:

- 1. To be effective and to Do No Harm, policy and practice must be grounded on rigorous context analysis that fully integrates gender analysis.**

The need to be context specific is well-understood in principle in P/CVE circles, but policy is too often based on gendered assumptions rather than analysis (For example: the violent extremist is often assumed to be a young man; women are generally assumed to be forced to join violent groups rather than choose to do so). The gender dynamics¹ underpinning violence and non-violence are inadequately understood.

Practitioners conduct detailed analysis of the gender dynamics (i.e. the power relationships between different men and different women, boys and girls in different circumstances) at play in communities at risk of VE. These processes are often highly consultative, including of groups (e.g. girls) who are often considered 'hard to reach'. The power of certain groups (e.g. some women) may be 'hidden' to the Western male gaze, but is not hidden to these women or their communities. These analytical processes and their outcomes are more legitimate and credible when owned by the different parts of the communities concerned.

In contrast to P/CVE policies, in which women are generally absent or treated as passive, in situations where social norms are either restrictive or quickly changing, violent groups often have highly gendered recruitment policies that offer different women specific opportunities and recognise their agency (for example: ISIL, Boko Haram) which are particularly effective when girls and women feel excluded in their communities.

EU policies and programmes should therefore take the following into account:

- a. The gendered assumptions underpinning PCVE concepts, policies and programmes need to be identified, then modified or validated by evidence. (Note that men are the primary victims of Boko Haram violence, for example).
- b. P/CVE initiatives must understand and address women's and girls' *agency* (this includes the choice to join a violent group/movement, the choice to use violence as well as execution of violent acts, recruitment etc) and not assume them to be only passive and/or only victims.
- c. Action-research that engages women, men, boys and girls from different backgrounds should supplement external research. Engaging only with urban, educated élites gives a distorted view. Engaging local civil society - specifically women and women's associations – systematically in context analysis provides analysis that is nimble in responding to dynamic contexts and is more robust over time. This also builds the capacities of communities to identify risks.

¹ Gender dynamics are understood here as the complex power relationships between men, women, boys and girls of different backgrounds. This includes understandings of gendered social norms – how a woman or a man is *expected* to behave – as they apply to rich/poor, un/educated, urban/rural men and women of different ethnic, religious and socioeconomic groups. These power relationships play out in and across the family, household, social institutions (eg. Clan/ faith community, social media), the state, etc. Intergenerational differences may be particularly acute. Note that men and boys have gendered identities as well as women and girls, and gendered expectations placed on them by family, community, access to 'global culture' etc.

- d. Feminist political economy analysis – which analyses how power relationships between gender, race/ethnicity/religion and socioeconomic class shape and are shaped by household, community, markets/economy and the state in a given situation - will bring greater nuance and precision to context analysis.
- e. The effect of VE on boys and girls must be better understood, including the attraction of violent groups to some boys and to some girls. As noted above, recruitment tactics are often gendered, and are successful when they tap into motivations for engaging with VE that are often gender-specific.
- f. The motivations of other girls and boys to choose non-violence remain under-examined and usually un-rewarded. In contrast, people who have chosen violence, and then chosen to leave, may be rewarded or otherwise “incentivised”.
- g. The European Commission should establish a Gender Working Group as a priority to oversee the work of its Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), which has been gender-blind so far.

2. Violent extremism is often rooted in long-term exclusion, while specific mechanisms may recruit individuals to participate in violence/ violent groups. Working with states is crucial for addressing P/CVE; reinforcing abusive regimes and security agents is likely to increase recruitment to VE.

- a. Participants noted that the root causes of VE (e.g. exclusion) require long-term development responses that are centred on human rights, gender equality and inclusive governance. Equitable economic growth, access to income generating activities (Note that radical groups often pay well) and universal access to good quality education are critical for PCVE.
- b. The EU should halt the flow of arms to the MENA region and support better border management to reduce arms trafficking within the region.
- c. Military responses do not alleviate the root causes of VE. Abusive security forces and/or operations (e.g. Nigeria) may increase support for organised violent groups (e.g. Boko Haram) as well as vigilantism. Support for hard security responses to VE must therefore be limited and centred on human rights protection.
- d. Corruption and patrimonial politics increase the likelihood of recruitment to VE. Security sector reform (SSR) and P/CVE projects with security systems that do not adequately address these challenges risk being counter-productive.
- e. Human-rights centred security sector reform are crucial for addressing recruitment. Prison reform, including rehabilitation of ex-prisoners, is pressing to reduce recruitment within prisons. The inappropriate incarceration of minors and women (particularly in military barracks) should be urgently addressed.
- f. SSR should be informed by detailed gender analysis to understand the power dynamics at play within the security organisations and between these and different parts of society. Projects should work to increase women’s participation in the security system as security providers, and also in civilian oversight bodies and in accessing security services that address the specific needs of women and girls in communities at risk of VE.

- g. Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) and deradicalisation processes are necessary. To be effective these need to understand and address the different motivations of males/females recruited into groups and their different needs for and challenge to successful reintegration. Deradicalisation programmes should not benefit those individuals or communities who have chosen/participated in violence over those who have chosen non-violence.
- h. The needs of children born of rape and/or to fighters need special attention.

3. Successful P/CVE programmes will address society and individuals, as well as the state, and the relations between these in a holistic manner.

- a. The EU must avoid duplicating the work of local actors and encourage better donor coordination.
- b. The EU and external donors should consider identifying and supporting appropriate emerging hybrid networks (e.g. government agencies) that work across civil society and have access to state institutions. (This is currently being piloted in Tunisia.)
- c. Social norms are often changing fast in communities at risk of VE. Women are becoming heads of households but without income generating activities, they may encourage children to join VE groups that pay and bring status. Income generating activities need to identify and address the needs of different women and men.
- d. Some girls and women are recruited into VE groups or support these groups because they are offered status and living conditions (e.g. corruption-free) not available to them in their communities. This underscores the need to improve women and girls' inclusion and status in their communities by supporting local organisations that promote gender equality.
- e. Instrumentalising women's associations, feminist groups and individual women (e.g. targeting the mothers of potential violent extremists) is likely to do harm not only to the women concerned but also to the objectives of P/CVE programming.
- f. The connections between VE and social media are often gendered, with women and girls more often recruited virtually as men/boys are more likely than women and girls to be recruited on the street/ outside the home.
- g. P/CVE needs to articulate what it is for, not only what it is against. The EU and other donors should work with local organisations to spread alternative messages in culturally relevant ways that promote social inclusion, religious tolerance: alternatives to what the violent extremists (and some states) currently offer. These should target different men and to different women.
- h. Civil society organisations work with schools, student councils, youth groups and local authorities to understand the points of view of young men and young women and develop and test curricula addressing key issues such as moderation and tolerance. These efforts should be supported as integral to improving education and access to education (see above).
- i. Working with religious leaders is important and very context-specific. In some cases, the international community has empowered local/traditional leaders who have asserted narrow social norms over their communities and closed down civic space.

This has often excluded women and girls from participating in public life. In some cases, religious leaders are part of the state apparatus. This may make them easier to access, but also less credible if they are seen as part of a problematic system of government. Some participants noted that working with religious leaders has been a staple approach for decades, with little clear results. Others point to success in identifying women leaders in a religious context and the importance of inclusiveness to counter VE; and with working with imams to develop materials on inclusion and tolerance for use in Islamic schools. The fora for bringing religious leaders together may be more important than funding.

- j. Engaging inclusive youth organisations – that bring together young women and young men from different backgrounds and including those led by young people – in meaningful consultation (with the EU) and support their meaningful inclusion in local and national governance is crucial for P/CVE.

The Civil Society Dialogue Network

The Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) is a mechanism for dialogue between civil society and EU policy-makers on issues related to peace and conflict. It is co-financed by the European Union (Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace). It is managed by the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), a civil society network, in co-operation with the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). The third phase of the CSDN will last from 2017 to 2020. For more information, please visit the [EPLO website](#).