

COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM THROUGH DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S. Agency for International Development’s Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) investments serve the U.S. national security interests by supporting peace, prosperity and stability abroad and reducing threats to Americans at home. In the years since USAID issued *The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency*, the challenges posed by violent extremism have evolved and the ability of violent extremist organizations (VEOs) to do harm has increased. New evidence highlighting what works to prevent or counter ideologically-motivated violence and lessons learned from our past programming have helped USAID to adapt to the changing context. In keeping with the objectives outlined in the *USAID Policy Framework: Ending the Need for Foreign Assistance*, this policy provides updated guidance to ensure that USAID’s CVE programs are designed and delivered in a manner that supports our partner countries’ journeys to self-reliance.¹

USAID will engage in collective efforts to prevent or counter violent extremism and encourage peace in support of national governments and civil society partners.

- We will advance country progress by building a community of partners with the commitment and capacity to counter violent extremism in their own countries and regions.
- We will engage where U.S. development assistance can have the greatest impact.

¹ United States Agency for International Development, [Policy Framework: Ending the Need for Foreign Assistance](#), Washington, DC, 2019.

- We will anticipate how violent extremism will evolve and will adjust programming accordingly.

This policy defines programmatic parameters to ensure USAID has a shared understanding of what differentiates CVE from other development interventions. The purpose of USAID’s CVE programming is to foster our partner countries’ self-reliance to prevent and address the violent extremist challenges that threaten to derail their development. USAID programs will be designed to:

1. Reduce the risk of recruitment and radicalization to violence and
2. Build the capacity and commitment of our partners in government, civil society and the private sector to prevent and counter the violent extremist threats they face.

USAID CVE programming will be tailored to local violent extremist contexts and threats, responsive to broader regional and transnational dynamics and measurable through CVE-specific monitoring, evaluation and learning. This policy reiterates the importance of coordinating targeted CVE investments with other U.S. foreign policy, security and development objectives to achieve meaningful and sustainable impact.

As the U.S. Government’s (USG’s) lead implementer of development and humanitarian policy and programming, USAID helps to protect U.S. national security by shaping the conditions for successful USG engagement in CVE.

Countering Violent Extremism refers to proactive actions to counter efforts by violent extremists to radicalize, recruit, and mobilize followers to violence and to address specific factors that facilitate violent extremist recruitment and radicalization to violence. CVE encompasses policy and activities to increase peaceful options for political, economic and social engagement available to communities and local governments and their ability to act on them.

Department of State & USAID Joint Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism

INTRODUCTION

Today's headlines remain rife with stories of violence and atrocities perpetrated by violent extremists in nearly every corner of the globe. More countries than ever before endure acts of terrorism from a growing array of VEOs. The costs of ideologically-motivated violence – in lives lost, communities destroyed, populations displaced and resources expended – is an onerous burden that falls heavily on lower and middle-income countries. USAID has built a significant base of evidence demonstrating that tailored development assistance can proactively reduce the risks of violence and assist partner countries to contribute to a community of nations committed to peace and security.

USAID will build on its considerable experience and results in CVE. In 2011, USAID issued one of the world's first formal development policies on CVE. Grounded in empirical research and practical experience, *The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency Policy*, focused Agency programming on the factors that drive extremism.² Since then, through in-depth research, analysis and worldwide engagement, USAID has added significantly to its store of knowledge about how, when and why violent extremism manifests and the ways in which development assistance can have the greatest impact. These lessons align with the vision articulated in the 2019 *USAID Policy Framework: Ending the Need for Foreign Assistance*, which reorients our work toward encouraging commitment and building capacity in partner countries across all levels—individuals, communities and governing institutions—so that they can eventually solve their development challenges without U.S. assistance.³

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- 1) reduce the risk of recruitment and radicalization to violence and**
- 2) build the capacity and commitment of our partners in government, civil society and the private sector to prevent and counter the violent extremist threats they face.**

To accomplish these goals, USAID will work alongside its partners to strengthen local leadership and whole-of-society ownership.

² United States Agency for International Development, [The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency Policy](#), Washington, D.C., 2011.

³ United States Agency for International Development, [Policy Framework: Ending the Need for Foreign Assistance](#), Washington, DC, 2019.

The following principles, informed by the existing knowledge base as well as USAID's broader experience with fragility, conflict and violence prevention and stabilization, will drive USAID's CVE programming.

- **Develop CVE interventions that are tailored, focused and measurable.** USAID will set clear CVE objectives, design a focused set of interventions that account for complexity and uncertainty and systematically evaluate progress and impact. Political economy and other contextual analyses of the dynamics that enable or mitigate violent extremism will underpin all projects.
- **Coordinate CVE programming as part of a larger prevention strategy.** CVE programs will use targeted development tools to affect an identified or emerging violent extremist problem. Often, CVE activities will be nested in broader multi-sectoral development strategies to address political marginalization, weak governance, social cohesion, reduced economic and educational opportunities and other structural conditions that lead to the spread of violent extremism in the first place.
- **Support and enhance local partner commitment, capacity and interaction.** USAID recognizes that local actors at all levels of society—government institutions, civil society, customary authorities, religious leaders, the private sector and communities—must lead their own CVE efforts. USAID will promote local ownership by supporting legitimate stakeholders in the design, coordination and implementation of CVE programs.
- **Ensure appropriate coordination and burden sharing within the U.S. Government (USG) and with donors.** A core tenet of all USAID programming is to collaborate with international stakeholders and the USG interagency to increase efficiency and accountability, reduce duplication and leverage our investments. International partnerships will be grounded in country ownership and priorities as articulated in national or subnational CVE plans.
- **Conflict sensitivity.** Violent extremism often arises in conflict-affected and fragile states. USAID will consider the relationship between CVE, fragility and violent conflict and will design, manage and monitor our programming to minimize unintended consequences and maximize positive outcomes. The Agency will be vigilant in those places where violent extremism and other forms of violence, state repression and related governance failures, crime, and mass atrocity mutually influence one another or where stove-piped interventions might inadvertently do harm.

- **Be flexible, agile and entrepreneurial.** USAID will specifically tailor CVE programming to the local socioeconomic, cultural and political environment, scale up successful approaches to sustain results and discontinue ineffective investments. The Agency will pilot new methods of collaboration and expand its work with local partners. It will encourage informed risk-taking and experimentation to ensure our CVE investments have an impact over the long term.
- **Utilize transnational strategies whenever necessary.** CVE programs are most effective when they are tailored and focused, often at a hyper-local level. However, because the dynamics driving or sustaining violent extremism cross national boundaries, USAID will also explore and reinforce appropriate opportunities for regional coordination, cooperation and information sharing.

KNOWLEDGE BASE

In the years since USAID issued its first CVE policy, the Agency has remained committed to its original goal: to design and implement effective, evidence-based development programming while systematically learning from, and adapting, its approaches. Our work aims to influence attitudes, behaviors and institutions to be more prosocial and peaceful. The following lessons continue to inform our knowledge base, shape our programming decisions and guide our thinking on how we reduce vulnerability to recruitment and radicalization and foster our country partners' self-reliance.

Reducing the Risk of Recruitment and Radicalization to Violence. USAID CVE programs

designed to reduce the risk of recruitment and radicalization to violence include, but are not limited to, preventing violent extremism from gaining traction, reducing the vulnerabilities of particular at-risk groups and supporting the disengagement and reintegration of individuals and groups formerly affiliated with VEOs. Effectively reducing risk requires a recognition that the factors that drive extremism constitute part of a dynamic process that can be influenced or interrupted.

There is no general profile or singular set of risk factors that predetermine participation in violent extremism.

Radicalization pathways are complex, deeply personal and influenced by specific contexts. Grievances, the structural “push” factors and the highly personalized “pull” factors detailed in the 2011 policy and associated research,⁴ shape the form that radicalization and recruitment takes with different communities in different contexts.

Harness the Positive Power of Young People. Children and young people ages 10-29 are disproportionately targeted for recruitment into VEOs. Youth are vulnerable to recruitment thanks to a complex mix of mutually reinforcing factors, such as discrimination, exposure to violence, social norms around gender and access to technology, all of which are compounded by the complexities of adolescent/youth development. There is a substantial body of evidence linking positive youth development (PYD) approaches to improved outcomes for youth, particularly as part of primary prevention. However, once an area or community is already vulnerable, a tailored approach to those most at risk will be needed to interrupt specific recruitment methods.

⁴ Guilain Denoeux with Lynn Carter, [Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism](#), USAID, 2009.

Recognize that women and girls play multiple roles.

USAID-funded case studies found that women play far more varied roles in violent extremism than the usual stereotypes of victim or peaceful bystander. Women can serve as recruiters, sympathizers, perpetrators and combatants in conflict and as negotiators, peacebuilders and leaders in conflict prevention and management. In addition, many women and girls experience gender-based violence at the hands of violent extremists. As a result, programming to prevent or interrupt violent radicalization must address the different needs and priorities of both women and men.

Despite their complexity, radicalization processes generally involve the activation of grievances in pursuit of goals made meaningful by specific ideologies and tangible through affiliation with a personal or virtual network.⁵ Triggering events, such as experiencing abuse at the hands of security forces or witnessing the murder, mistreatment or imprisonment of others, can precipitate mobilization to violence.⁶

Whether and how recruitment or radicalization occurs may also depend on the resistance and resilience of individuals (for example through critical thinking); of groups (for example, through deliberate socialization with peers who are not associated with VEOs); or of societies (for example, through cultivation of respect for the rule of law and inclusive governance).

Tell a Different Story. Violent extremists employ the same strategies and tools as marketers. Both online and in person, they target and test content and build an engaged audience by advancing specific “calls to action” across platforms. Challenging these messages is a critical component of risk reduction strategies. But emerging research suggests that the neurological impact of marginalization and exclusion strengthens belief in a cause to a point where simple counter messages may not have impact. Instead, communication strategies should convey accessible alternatives that dilute the potency of the violent extremist argument while creating prosocial identities, opportunities for engagement and expressions of agency. Marrying alternative narratives with activities designed to promote social and behavioral change can be an important means of interrupting the cognitive biases that underpin support for violent extremism.

⁵ Arie W. Kruglanski, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, and Rohan Gunaratna, *The Three Pillars of Radicalization: Needs, Narratives, and Networks*, Oxford University Press, 2019.

⁶ UNDP, [*The Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment in Africa*](#), New York, 2017, p. 72.

To reduce risk and/or build resilience within a community, USAID CVE programming necessarily begins with an analysis of the interplay among grievances, key influencers, mobilizing factors, external forces and violence or other triggering events⁷ to determine context-specific objectives. Program goals may be short-term, such as providing targeted support to an at-risk group; medium-term, such as reinforcing the capacity of local organizations to identify vulnerable individuals and intervene on their own; or longer-term such as building the capacity of a cross-section of society to address any future extremist threat.

Learning from USAID’s Gang Prevention Work. As with CVE, USAID’s gang prevention programs are designed to prevent or interrupt violence. While there are notable differences in the target populations, some interventions show promise in both contexts, such as: epidemiological models that direct engagement to individual, community and national levels; public health approaches that marry broad-based primary prevention with targeted engagement for those deemed to be at higher risk; and a place-based approach that recognizes that violence clusters in specific places, among specific people and around specific behaviors. Best practice in both fields cite parental engagement, cross-cutting partnerships and trust-based relationships, credible, often faith-based intermediaries and social cohesion as key to program success.

Building the capacity and commitment of our partners in government, civil society and the private sector to prevent and counter violent extremism. Building resilient and inclusive local systems requires engagement across multiple levels and with an array of stakeholders and influencers.⁸ Key goals of programming designed to build capacity and commitment include increased government responsiveness, community mobilization, civil society strengthening and citizen engagement.

Support for local systems may include investments in country capacity at national, local and community levels in order to enhance governance, security, justice, education, civil society and media. Often, the drivers of extremism are rooted not only in the inability of the state to deliver services, security or resources, but also in the manner in which any services are delivered, especially if it generates perceptions of inequality, exclusion or discrimination. National governments can demonstrate their commitment to reverse the patterns of governance that enabled violent extremism in the first place by modifying laws, policies, actions, narratives or norms.

⁷ USAID, [Conflict Assessment Framework, Version 2.0](#), USAID, Washing, DC, 2012.

⁸ USAID, [Local Systems: A Framework for Supporting Sustained Development](#), Washington, DC, 2014.

Factoring partner commitment into determinations about where and how to program against the drivers of extremism is an important determinant of long-term sustainability. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), USAID delivered flexible support to localities based on analysis of the local risk factors, the ability and willingness of community leaders and other partners to engage and the degree of trust across local institutions.

Capacity building can be designed to strengthen country systems, such as in Kenya where a national CVE strategy led to the subsequent development of county-level action plans that, with USAID support, mobilized local governments and communities to collaborate. The national

commitment to incorporate civil society and community-level partners into this planning was designed to build trust, increase information sharing and limit radicalization among disaffected community members in areas vulnerable to terrorist recruitment. In other cases, a particular focus, such as on the educational system, might be more appropriate.

Given the transnational nature of violent extremism, regional organizations also play an important role in prevention. With support from USAID, for example, the Permanent Secretariat of the G5 Sahel is helping its member states to develop inclusive national CVE strategies to enhance coordination among national and local governments, civil society and the international community. As part of this process, the Permanent Secretariat of the G5 Sahel has developed a set of guiding principles for CVE strategies and has helped its member states to involve a more inclusive group of stakeholders in strategy formulation.

Ultimately, understanding how actors interact, the roles they play and the relationships that influence them is key to both risk reduction and sustainable CVE capacity building.

Community mobilization and empowerment is a critical component of capacity building. USAID programming in violence prevention generally and in CVE in particular has shown that interventions are more effective when local communities are directly involved in setting priorities and implementing programs. As a result, influential community, private sector, diaspora and religious leaders, youth, women and people with disabilities can contribute significantly to local trust- and resilience-building and dissemination of narratives that emphasize peaceful coexistence.

POLICY GUIDANCE

The principles articulated in this document will drive USAID's decision-making and investments in CVE programming designed to help partner countries prevent and counter violent extremism. These principles will ensure that USAID programs are responsive, adaptive, coordinated and contribute to sustainable outcomes.

Develop CVE-specific interventions that are focused...

CVE programs that specifically focus *on* violent extremism differ from those programs working *in* areas affected by violent extremism and related instability. Many other development and peacebuilding programs may take place in marginalized areas or with similar risk groups. Traditional development programs should not be considered CVE simply because they are implemented in zones of violent extremist influence or presence. CVE programming will have a specific objective to prevent or interrupt the spread of violent extremism.

USAID will conduct CVE assessments to identify the factors that drive communities to support violence extremism; the means and motives of the key actors and organizations that mobilize them; and the contexts in which recruitment and radicalization occur. Assessments will identify areas of resilience and weakness at national, local and community levels.

...tailored... CVE programs should be tailored to address concrete problems in specific geographic region(s) and/or with specific populations that are exposed to violent extremism or vulnerable to recruitment and radicalization to violence. In some cases, CVE interventions may be sufficient on their own. In others, they may need to be sequenced and aligned with other foreign policy, development or security objectives. A tailored approach is not short term: sustained engagement is critical to generating change in perceptions, attitudes, behaviors and social networks that are fundamental to reducing violent extremism.

...and measurable... CVE programming effectiveness can be gauged by changes in public attitudes, perceptions and behaviors related to governance, government legitimacy, provision of services and the use of violence; shifts in the state-societal relationship; community cohesion or inter-ethnic or cross-confessional reconciliation and cooperation; and the ability of government and civil society to prevent, mitigate and manage the threat of violent extremism. USAID will develop baseline and endline studies to determine the impact of programming, as well as continuously refine methods to adapt and improve program effectiveness. Because most CVE programs take place in environments characterized by uncertainty, USAID will employ a range of traditional, technological and complexity-awareness methods to develop a more thorough understanding of how Agency programming affects violent extremism.

Coordinate CVE programming as part of a larger prevention strategy. Fragility, conflict and violent extremism often coexist and reinforce each other. In some cases, USAID’s CVE efforts will be implemented via a standalone program or activity. Often, such programming will constitute part of a larger and layered development strategy aimed at decreasing the risk of conflict, violence and instability; reducing vulnerability to related crises and shocks, including climate change; decreasing the influence of malign actors; or improving individual and collective resilience. While CVE programs address *specific* factors in *specific* settings, they will be informed, and complemented by, other prevention and development efforts. Ensuring coherence among development priorities and programs, particularly in complex contexts, aligns with and supports the vision articulated in the Agency’s policy framework.

While the causes of violent extremism are complex, multifaceted and often rooted in personal experience, members of VEOs consistently attribute their support for violence to feelings of

In 2016, USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) partnered with twelve civil society leaders in Niger’s southern Diffa region to create the Nalewa Mada network which aimed to enhance the resilience of local leaders to Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa (BH and ISIS-WA). Today the network, which includes 30 villages with more than 300 religious, traditional, youth and women leaders, is recognized by communities and local authorities as a key contributor to peace and reconciliation efforts in the region. In addition to mounting its own early warning system, Nalewa Mada conducts community projects, including preparing communities for the reintegration of former BH/IS-WA defectors, improving livelihoods through temporary employment and mediating community disputes.

injustice wrought from a system perceived to be rigged against them. Development deficits, such as marginalization, exclusion, corruption or gender inequality, exacerbate these perceptions. Conducted alongside tailored CVE interventions, USAID’s traditional development programs can help committed government, civil society and private sector partners counter these trends by building more inclusive societies, improving governance and providing opportunities to increase the voice and agency of at-risk populations, including women and youth. Additionally, such programming can help increase social cohesion, reduce grievances and provide the economic and educational benefits that amplify political and social improvements. In the aftermath of violence, programming can also help stabilize communities and regions affected by violent

extremism, conflict, climate vulnerability and insurgency.

Nesting CVE under a broader prevention strategy makes good development sense: The vast majority of terrorism-related deaths have occurred in countries experiencing some form of

conflict which, in turn, has generated unprecedented humanitarian crises.⁹ In addition, the contexts in which violent extremism spreads, including in comparatively peaceful countries, are affected by geopolitical competition, political repression and fragility. Focused and targeted CVE programs will yield greater success if they are appropriately sequenced and layered within an inclusive diplomatic and development strategy.

Support and enhance local partner commitment, capacity and interaction. The capacity to prevent or interrupt the spread of violence extremism strengthens partner resilience and creates opportunities for collaboration and peacebuilding. USAID will increasingly design CVE programs with the explicit intent of strengthening partner systems in support of a locally-owned CVE vision or plan.¹⁰ Doing so requires engagement with a wide range of actors, including national and subnational government institutions, civil society, customary and religious authorities, educational institutions, communities and/or local populations. USAID shall endeavor to work with partners who are viewed as legitimate by the population. These whole-of-society solutions allow countries to move beyond purely securitized responses to address the multidimensional nature of the violent extremist problem set.

Ensure appropriate coordination and burden sharing within the USG and with donors. USAID will continue to engage with multilateral institutions, international and regional organizations and bilateral donors to influence resource allocations and programmatic decisions. Doing so will ensure that multilateral investments are complementary, sustainable and minimize inefficiencies. When violent extremism creates or arises from complex crises, USAID will work to ensure donor alignment along the relief to development continuum. Government-led CVE action plans can be useful platforms for coordination and shared prioritization.

Conflict sensitivity. Violent extremism does not exist in isolation – it emerges from the conditions and dynamics that shape a given environment. Because development projects become a part of the context in which they operate, they can change local relationships, empower some people and potentially disempower others. Conflict-sensitive CVE programs take into account the local power dynamics, relationships and behaviors, not simply technical outcomes. Understanding partner motivations and building trust are critical. For example, if local government is seen as repressive, illegitimate or biased, government-to-government partnerships will cause suspicion within communities. Frequent and timely conflict-sensitivity or political economy analyses that integrate gender considerations, can help ensure that projects deliver their intended results without doing harm, even as relationships and circumstances change.

⁹ Institute for Economics & Peace. [*Global Terrorism Index 2018: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*](#), Sydney, 2018, p.42.

¹⁰ USAID, *Ending the Need for Foreign Assistance*, Washington, DC, 2019, p. 38.

Be flexible, agile and entrepreneurial. Most CVE activities take place in highly fluid, complex operating environments. USAID will maximize procurement mechanisms that take into account the need for flexibility, risk management and rapid response in these types of environments.¹¹ Within the USG, USAID has unique capabilities to conduct expeditious field and network analyses and deliver tailored programs to ensure that speed does not come at a cost of conflict sensitivity. For example, when its analysis showed that Boko Haram and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria - West Africa (ISIS-WA) were not recruiting as actively in Northern Cameroon as in other areas of the Lake Chad Basin, USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives shifted its programming from recruitment to stabilization and reconciliation in communities that were most affected by VEO conflict.

Additionally, USAID will adopt an entrepreneurial approach that requires a different risk posture and more intensive monitoring, evaluation, learning and adapting efforts to redirect interventions where necessary.¹² Initial small investments allow for experimental approaches or testing new, nontraditional partnerships such as with diaspora groups or private sector actors¹³ which may broaden USAID's reach and impact.

Utilize transnational strategies whenever necessary. While deeply rooted in national dysfunction and state fragility, violent extremism is also a regional and global phenomenon. Neighboring states are susceptible to the spillover effects of violent extremism and conflict. Through social media's instantaneous delivery of messages, tactics and ideology, these effects can be felt worldwide. Where appropriate, USAID will design regional CVE programming, either as a single cross-border program or as complementary programming on both sides of a border, and consider approaches to mitigate the proliferation of violent extremist media content. In West Africa, for example, extremist ideology is a region-wide threat. To build resistance, USAID is helping local communities and their leaders, civil society organizations, national governments and regional organizations to build relationships and strengthen coordination while simultaneously targeting at-risk populations at the local level. Transnational strategies require strong coordination with partner governments and with the U.S. Departments of State and Defense.

¹¹ USAID, [Acquisition and Assistance Strategy](#), Washington, DC, 2018

¹² USAID, [Risk Appetite Statement](#), Washington, DC, 2018.

¹³ USAID, [Private Sector Engagement Policy](#), Washington, DC, 2019.

CONCLUSION

This policy provides the foundation and guidance for USAID’s CVE programs. It affirms the importance of the development discipline in addressing this critical challenge to the security and economic prosperity of the United States and its allies. The principles defined herein set the Agency’s CVE engagement criteria and demonstrate its resolve to work alongside partner countries, their governments and communities, civil society and the private sector, women and youth, and leaders of all faiths to build capacity and foster resilience to violent extremist influences.