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Cohort 1: Inclusive Dialogue

The right fit? The role of inclusive dialogue in preventing violent extremism

Gregory Attila Connor

Violent extremism has become firmly established as a major threat facing United Nations member states. Attacks by groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram have risen dramatically, with deaths from terrorism more than doubling from 2014 to 2016.¹ At the same time, messages of hatred and intolerance have been increasingly cited. Such dynamics may incite hitherto peaceful societies to radicalize. While the threat of violent extremist groups has primarily been dealt with through security-based counter-terrorism measures, various formats for preventing and responding to it have also taken shape. At the United Nations, these include the Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, which was launched in 2015.²

What role does inclusive dialogue play in preventing violent extremism? When a struggle for agency yields violence (a process herein termed “negative agency”)—such as in the cases referred to in UN Security Resolution 2178 (2014)—is inclusive dialogue the right way to respond? If it is part of the toolbox, what are its strengths and limitations in engaging with radical or violent extremist groups? Lastly, what emerging lessons can help to ensure that inclusive dialogue ‘does no harm’ in the efforts to prevent and respond to violent extremism?

Understanding the power and constraints of inclusive dialogue

Dialogue has long been heralded as a progressive medium with the potential to resolve conflict. It can take shape in numerous formats and at different stages of the conflict cycle. Somewhat confusingly, ‘dialogue’ is often used synonymously with formal negotiations or mediation processes—commonly referred to as official ‘Track I’ and ‘Track II’ efforts—as well as with the “quiet diplomacy” that often leads to formal negotiations. But dialogue is increasingly viewed as a way to deal with seemingly uncooperative actors.

There is growing recognition that extremist groups might enter into dialogue through a sense of ‘principled realism,’ for ‘engaging in dialogue with a group and its members is not the same thing as legitimizing its goals and ideology. Used skillfully, engagement may moderate their policies and behavior.’³ Engagement of extremist groups remains controversial, however, and is often constrained by legislative and organizational restrictions, as well as by moral and ethical considerations.⁴

Some experts argue that when demands are extreme and radical groups are unresponsive to broader constituencies’ perspectives, engagement is unlikely to succeed.⁵ On the other hand, the UN is considered particularly adroit at dealing with groups inaccessible to other actors. The former Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Afghanistan, Kai Eide, has spoken openly of his engagement with senior Taliban leaders while serving in that role.⁶ On the other hand, the senior UN official and former Special Envoy to the Middle East, Alvaro de Soto, criticized the UN for limiting engagement with belligerents and resigned over restrictions he faced in dealing with Hamas and Syria.⁷

‘Dialogue’ also describes wide-ranging processes that do not necessarily lead to official ‘Track I’ and ‘Track II’ efforts or that may transpire in the absence of such formal processes. Such forms of dialogue often involve grassroots actors and aim to mitigate or transform conflict, or to establish an area of cooperation, such as humanitarian action, rather than explicitly and formally to settle a conflict. It is in this vein that practitioners speak of inclusive dialogue, which—though not always only at the local level—moves a diverse range of actors towards a common objective such as a shared understanding or trust. This Issue Brief explores such forms of dialogue at the local level, particularly within communities susceptible to the influences and effects of violent extremism.

Embedding inclusive dialogue in the prevention of violent extremism agenda

Inclusive dialogue is among various emerging formats in the new toolkit for preventing violent extremism. Firmly established as part of the statecraft of diplomacy, conflict prevention and peacebuilding, it appears particularly fitting because its broad objectives range from generating common understanding to, ultimately, ending conflict. Indeed, the Secretary-General's Plan of Action calls for "convening regional and national dialogues on preventing violent extremism with a range of actors, encompassing youth engagement, gender equality, the inclusion of marginalized groups, the role of municipalities, and positive outreach through social media and other virtual platforms."⁸

The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Framework for Preventing Violent Extremism by Promoting Inclusive Development, Tolerance and Respect for Diversity states that "the more a society provides opportunities for dialogue, and for different groups to develop mutual understanding with one another, the greater the chance that trust, tolerance and respect for diversity will flourish."⁹ As part of its development approach to prevention of violent extremism in Africa, UNDP plans a series of inter-faith and intra-faith dialogues in various hot spots to help lower tension and raise awareness of radicalization. In some places this will involve wise men and women in dialogue initiatives.¹⁰

Challenges to preventing and responding to violent extremism through inclusive dialogue

Inclusive dialogue to prevent violent extremism faces three challenges that differ from those confronting inclusive dialogue that addresses fragility, conflict and violence.

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Given the role of negative agency in violent extremism, the potential and limitations of participation in inclusive dialogue must be properly considered. A frequent criticism is that the 'right people' are not always at the table. Poor selection limits the effectiveness of interventions. Emerging evidence suggests that varying degrees of inclusivity can either aid or hinder dialogue processes.

The first challenge is that the format often lends itself only to acquiescent parties. Selection bias favors well-known 'do-gooders' rather than neutral voices or those capable of shuttling between various actors. Such selection can do little to stymie support that extremists receive from local communities, which is often "...based less on shared values and more on what else they provide when things fall apart: protection against a hated regime, quick dispute resolution, social advancement or opportunity for profit."¹¹ The only-recent acceptance of the prevention-of-violent-extremism agenda has allowed little time for adapting or substituting community development and peacebuilding models. As a result, the same 'professionalized NGOs' are often called upon to provide voice and agency on behalf of civil society, and usually with limited legitimacy and authority. It is important to explore

the extent to which the paradigm of conflict can change without listening to or trying to neutralize radical voices.

The second challenge to preventing and responding to violent extremism through inclusive dialogue is in its framing. The phenomenon of violent extremism generally lacks a common definition, including in the UN Plan of Action. Not knowing exactly what is to be prevented can produce problems during the dialogue process. So, too, can the very label 'violent extremist', which risks "delegitimizing groups' political grievances and agendas—however remote some of their goals—and pushing policy away from politics".¹² There is also a risk that dialogue could incorrectly identify and address the drivers of conflict. Some violent extremist groups, notably Boko Haram, are nebulous networks; without a defined understanding of what dialogue seeks to prevent, there is a risk that their criminal activity could be conflated with ideology. Lastly, and rather paradoxically, an overt focus on violent extremism can make prevention more elusive by averting attention from precursory or tributary phenomena to the act of terror itself. Ignoring the dynamics surrounding radicalization can have serious consequences.

The third challenge is that violent extremism differs from armed conflicts of the past. In order to succeed, inclusive dialogue must take this difference into account. One of the hallmarks of violent extremism is its propensity to spread rapidly across borders and appeal on a global, as well as local, level. Violent extremist groups are often connected to transnational networks that rely on charismatic leadership, global struggle, or similar ideologies as much as by fomenting local grievances against the state. Depending on context, dialogue that draws solely upon local resources may not be 'inclusive enough'. A way may need to be found to explore and bridge transnational youth issues, the role of technology and social media, and the dominant global narratives of struggle, oppression and liberation.

Finding the right fit: A 'do no harm' approach to preventing and responding to violent extremism through inclusive dialogue

Despite these challenges, inclusive dialogue can provide opportunities for preventing and responding to violent extremism when conditions are right and the dialogue is conflict-sensitive. Inclusive dialogue should be thought through in terms of its opportunities and limitations in dealing with the drivers (rather than the manifestations) of extremism. Consideration can then be given to what the dialogue effort can achieve: addressing underlying structural factors that could be conducive to radicalization and violent extremism, or focusing on proximate factors such as recruitment, disengagement, counter-narratives, human rights aspects of civil-military relations, or other interventions.

Understanding the dialogue process through the 'theory of change' helps to reduce the risk that stakeholders might

suffer from unintended negative consequences. There are three ways in which inclusive dialogue can play a powerful role at the local level: prevention, mitigation and disengagement. All three aspects rely on a conflict-sensitive approach.

Prevention

By concentrating on local communities susceptible to radicalization and targeted by violent extremism, inclusive dialogue can generate a level of understanding and coordinated local action impossible to achieve through elite-level processes. Inclusive dialogue aimed at preventing violent extremism can engender a sense of shared responsibility in affected communities. Moreover, inclusive dialogue that seeks to prevent and respond to violent extremism by working directly within communities affected by it can help tackle vexing questions of identity and social cohesion that other efforts rarely address successfully. The shared understanding that can result from the inclusive dialogue process can inform and shape prevention-and-response activities that address root causes. Along with analysis of grievances and sources of marginalization, those planning and supporting inclusive dialogue at the community level are often well placed to consider its views about legitimate representation.

When managed the right way, local inclusive dialogue can directly prevent radicalization and violent extremism by reducing emerging fault lines, strengthening communication and fostering mutual respect. Evidence from Libya suggests that inter-generational dialogue helped reduce the spread of violent extremism in affected communities.¹³ Such dialogue can also reduce risks of future conflict—such as inter-generational and agriculturalist-pastoralist conflict or struggle over scarce resources—not directly linked to violent extremism.

Mitigation

Where possible, inclusive dialogue should identify and promote ‘proxy approaches’ that allow greater understanding of the radical voices and influences driving violent extremism. While not condoning violence, community leaders could identify ways to listen to radical voices in an effort to understand drivers of violence. Such leaders may also determine through ‘proxy approaches’ that certain elements should be brought into the dialogue process. For example, radical voices might reveal that a heavy-handed security approach is driving violence. Community leaders might subsequently consider community-security approaches to introduce civil-military cooperation elements in dialogue.

In doing so, local inclusive dialogue can also directly mitigate the effects of radicalization and violent extremism in affected communities. On the front lines, local communities are often best placed to identify the effects of violent extremism and the capacity to mitigate them. Inclusive dialogue on the local level strengthens horizontal collaboration across social groups, thereby enhancing the possibility for knowledge exchange; identification of key persons, resources and

capacity to mitigate problems; and steps required for concerted action. To be effectively sustained, inclusive dialogue on the local level must also strengthen vertical collaboration, between the local community and the state. Local inclusive dialogue can play a mitigating role in risk management, early warning and early action.

Disengagement

Local inclusive dialogue can also help directly disengage radicalized individuals and supporters of violent extremist groups. Drawing on the legitimacy and authority of local leaders, such dialogue can produce alternative narratives that resonate within affected communities; top-down counter-narratives are often perceived as subjective or out of touch.¹⁴ Where the media are free to operate they may also help promote disengagement. Across the board, community leaders who engage in inclusive dialogue for the prevention of violent extremism and the organizations that support such processes must be aware of the limitations of disengagement when clear legal avenues or amnesties are not in place.

One size does not fit all: using inclusive dialogue to prevent and respond to violent extremism

Prevention, mitigation and disengagement all rely on a conflict-sensitive approach. But inclusive dialogue also requires a firm commitment by national stakeholders and development partners to address real and perceived grievances. Indeed, the political, security, humanitarian, human-rights and development aspects of violent extremism must be addressed if peace is to be sustained. As the prevention of violent extremism agenda advances, inclusive dialogue can help ensure that national responses address not only the manifestations of violent extremism but also the conditions that led to its emergence.

Notes

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14. International Peace Institute. September 2016. Investing in Peace and the Prevention of Violence in West Africa and the Sahel-Sahara: Conversations on the Secretary-General's Plan of Action.
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About the PDA Fellowship:

UNDP's Oslo Governance Center in partnership with the Joint UNDP-DPA Programme has established a PDA Fellowship Programme in 2016 consisting of several cohorts, each involving between 4-6 PDA's and/or PDA like conflict prevention specialists over a period of two weeks. The Fellowship Programme involves guided reflections to help draw out the Fellows' experience on pre-identified conflict prevention and peacebuilding issues.

About the author:

Gregory Attila Connor currently manages the UN Operations and Crisis Centre's Watch Room at the UN Headquarters in New York. Previously, he was the Sr. PDA for Cameroon, covering the sub-region and before which in Timor-Leste, in Libya on the National Dialogue, in Central Asia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the South Caucasus on conflict prevention. He has worked for international think tank in Brussels and New York and international organizations (The World Bank and OSCE).

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