

# Preventing violent extremism in Uganda

## The role of resilience and dialogue

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This report explores two distinct but complementary approaches to addressing violent extremism at the local community level in Uganda. In the first approach, communities engage their agency in building resilience to the conditions that contribute to violent extremism. In the second, dialogue within and between communities, as well as between communities and the security and justice actors active in them, is used to address and resolve problems that might otherwise result in radicalisation to violent extremism.

## Key findings

- ▶ The challenges currently facing local communities include issues that are major risk factors for radicalisation to violent extremism.
- ▶ These communities do, however, also demonstrate protective factors that can be leveraged for resilience against violent extremism, including some level of integration and trust between different identity groups.
- ▶ Communities identified various strategies to build inherent resilience, such as strengthening social support networks, developing community resources, increasing community safety and building a collective identity.
- ▶ Although communities recognise the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council and the Church of Uganda as institutions that can facilitate dialogue, there is a general lack of awareness about public platforms that could also be instrumental.
- ▶ There are multiple fallouts from the strained relationship between communities and security agencies on the one hand, and between communities and the justice sector on the other. These challenges are wide-ranging, irrespective of gender or age.

## Recommendations

### Community:

- ▶ Cooperation between community leaders from all identity groups must be strengthened and increased through more regular dialogues and meetings.
- ▶ The voices of those who feel marginalised – such as women and youth – need to be included deliberately and listened to in community discussions by local leaders.

### Law enforcement and justice actors:

- ▶ Law enforcement agents who work within communities should receive training on engaging in non-criminal spaces and interacting with people from different cultures and religions. This will develop and promote trust between community members and law enforcement.
- ▶ There is a need to establish transitional justice mechanisms within communities to facilitate healing among community members and

groups that have been the victims of human rights violations.

- ▶ Communities need to be empowered with knowledge about the security challenges that face them, including violent extremism, because the more aware they are, the more agency they have to be resilient to the threats.

### Policymakers:

- ▶ An inclusive cross-section of local actors and community leaders should be involved in conducting an initial mapping of strengths, resources and examples of resilience in a specific community, which can be used to set policy priorities in collaboration with the community.
- ▶ District leaders and local councils need to engage the community in a more comprehensive way across the entire lifespan of government programmes aimed at that community.

## Introduction

East Africa continues to face multiple threats relating to violent extremism and terrorism. Although Somalia is at the epicentre of the problem, researchers and policymakers are also looking at ways to address and possibly prevent the spread of violent extremist narratives, ideologies and recruitment in countries such as Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda.

While Uganda has not suffered any direct terrorist attacks since the 2010 al-Shabaab bombings in Kampala, it is dealing with many of the macro-level factors associated with the emergence of violent extremism (and conflict more generally). These include socio-economic and political grievances, inter- and intra-community tension, marginalisation, poor governance and low levels of development.

Many studies on violent extremism in East Africa focus on the pathways to or risk factors associated with radicalisation to violent extremism and the impact of violent extremism on affected communities.<sup>1</sup>

However, less is known about the factors that enable a community (or identity groups within a community) to adopt strategies and relationships that address the threat

of violent extremism in a proactive and constructive way. This may happen organically or as a result of intervention, all the while building resilience to the dynamic forms of violence that threaten peace and development.

This report seeks to examine two distinct but complementary approaches to addressing violent extremism at the local community level in Uganda. In the first approach, it looks at the potential for communities to engage their agency and resilience to the conditions contributing to violent extremism. The second examines the use of dialogue to address and resolve problems that might otherwise result in radicalisation to violent extremism.

## Methodology

This study focused on Kampala and Bugiri in eastern Uganda. Kampala, the country's capital, was targeted by al-Shabaab in a major terrorist attack in July 2010.

The Bugiri district has experienced a number of murders linked to violent extremism and has been associated with recruitment by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), as well as a high number of returnees.<sup>2</sup>

The study used a qualitative methodology approach. Desk-based literature reviews were conducted on the

Figure 1: Map of Uganda, showing Bugiri and Kampala



two themes of community resilience to violent extremism and the role of dialogue in the context of violent extremism in Uganda.

Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), traditional and religious community leaders, law enforcement officers, criminal justice actors and a member of the academic community. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with selected identity groups within communities, including men, women and youth.<sup>3</sup>

The 40 FGD participants were recruited using established networks in communities and a snowballing technique. The fieldwork was conducted by Nuwagaba Muhsin Kaduyu, the ISS' in-country partner in Uganda.

## Violent extremism in Uganda

Outlining the trends and key actors involved in violent extremism in Uganda is vital in understanding the country's risk factors. These factors underscore entry points for the complementary approaches of enhancing community resilience and dialogue.

First group is the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) which emerged in the late 1980s in northern Uganda. It has exploited Christian rhetoric while brutalising communities in Uganda, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and South Sudan. The group has also launched an armed rebellion against the Ugandan government.

In 2005 the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for the LRA's leader, Joseph Kony, and four of his commanders for crimes against humanity and war crimes.<sup>4</sup> The LRA's sadism discouraged resistance among local communities, while ensuring a steady influx of forced child recruits used on the front lines of battles.<sup>5</sup>

A second group is the ADF which has its origins in the mid to late 1990s and has drawn, to some extent, on Islamist ideas. The ADF operates in the Rwenzori borderland of western Uganda and the eastern DRC. Despite having to contend with offensives by the Ugandan and Congolese armies, as well as a United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission, the ADF has proven resilient.<sup>6</sup>

While some Ugandan and Congolese Muslims joined the group through Islamic networks, recruitment has

also been driven by more practical motivations. Some of these include the desire to escape poverty or unemployment, frustration with the government or false promises of future opportunities.

In addition to violence perpetrated against local communities, the ADF has also been involved in business ventures such as cross-border trade, agriculture and the taxing of timber forests.<sup>7</sup> While Jamil Mukulu, a central figure in the ADF for many years, was recently apprehended,<sup>8</sup> the ADF remains a threat.

Community resilience describes how well a community navigates and responds to adversity of any kind

A third significant group is the Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (known as al-Shabaab), which poses the most significant violent extremist threat to countries in the region. In July 2010 over 70 people were killed in suicide bombings by al-Shabaab in Kampala.<sup>9</sup>

Al-Shabaab declared its allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2012, highlighting the transnational scope of the challenge. Since 2007 Uganda and its neighbours have instituted various responses, some of them military, as reflected in the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) peacekeeping mission.<sup>10</sup>

While Uganda, unlike Somalia, may not be directly in the line of persistent al-Shabaab attacks, the societal risk factors highlighted at the beginning of this report remain prevalent.

## Building community resilience to violent extremism

### What is community resilience?

The concept of community resilience to violent extremism has emerged over the past decade. There has been a shift away from a sustained focus on the risks and vulnerabilities of a community towards an equal if not more enhanced focus on building communal strengths and protective factors.

At its most basic, community resilience describes how well a community navigates and responds to adversity of any kind. It is both a process of and a capacity for

successfully adapting to, addressing and ultimately overcoming challenging or threatening circumstances.<sup>11</sup>

In relation to violent extremism, building community resilience refers to efforts to develop and foster protective factors within the community to mitigate or eliminate the risks associated with radicalisation to violent extremism.

Research has shown that while there are numerous pathways to community resilience, the most effective centre around two characteristics:

- Social capital (the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society that enable that society to function effectively)
- Community competence (the collective ability of individuals to learn about their social environment and use that information to identify problems and develop solutions that meet the needs of the community)<sup>12</sup>

Social capital and community competence are shaped by three factors:

- Bonding capital: this refers to cultural identity and connectedness, an individual's familiarity with and anchoring in his/her own cultural or ethnic heritage, practices, beliefs, traditions, values and norms. Grossman et al. point out that in the context of violent extremism, being culturally robust, flexible, and open to and tolerant of others offers significant protection against the appeal of violent extremist narratives.<sup>13</sup>
- Bridging capital: this entails social connections, relationships and active engagement with people outside of an individual's cultural or ethnic group. These connections build trust, confidence and reciprocity, as well as enabling access to more or different resources, with people in alternative social, religious, ethnic or cultural networks. Learning to be tolerant of different views also enhances the ability of a community to participate collectively in finding solutions to common local problems.
- Linking capital: this speaks to respect, trust, confidence and communication between community members and those in authority (be they community leaders, religious leaders or government officials). Particularly in socio-culturally disadvantaged or economically resource-poor areas, communities without sufficient linking capital 'remain at a persistent disadvantage in being able to

either grasp or intervene in the policy structures that shape their social relations and identities and govern their everyday lives'.<sup>14</sup> In addition, a trust gap between communities and local authorities exacerbates any fault lines that may make communities more vulnerable to social harms.<sup>15</sup>

Strengthening the protective factors linked to resilience within a community means that interventions are not limited to preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). Instead, they also intersect with a broad range of more long-term development and governance goals.

This may prove more meaningful and useful for communities in eastern Uganda, as outlined below.

### **Making the case for building resilience in local communities in Uganda**

There is some tension over the extent to which Uganda needs to focus on P/CVE interventions. On the one hand, there is ongoing concern over the country's vulnerability, considering its position in a volatile geopolitical region, its troop contributions to AMISOM, and the existence of a range of risk factors.<sup>16</sup>

Development partners in Uganda should pursue measures designed to reduce vulnerability to violent extremism

On the other hand, Uganda has had relatively few terrorist attacks over the last decade and there is concern that emphasising the threat of terrorism justifies counter-terrorism activities that can be used for political ends, with the associated human rights violations.

Indeed, in some contexts P/CVE initiatives can be counter-productive. In its study of the drivers of recruitment to violent extremism in Africa, the United Nations Development Programme found that 48% of those who joined violent extremist groups were aware of P/CVE initiatives in their communities. However, they 'identified distrust of those delivering these programmes as one of the primary reasons for not taking part'.<sup>17</sup>

Romaniuk and Durner argue that instead of pursuing measures designed to address violent extremism directly (P/CVE-specific programmes), development partners in Uganda should pursue measures designed

to reduce vulnerability to violent extremism (P/CVE-relevant programmes).

This means that interventions would be “mutually supportive” of PVE objectives, designed to have a positive effect in reducing [violent] extremism while primarily addressing other concerns’.<sup>18</sup> These ‘other’ concerns are, for example, poverty, unemployment, poor governance and limited opportunities for social mobility and participatory citizenship.

In line with this analysis, none of the respondents in this study identified radicalisation or violent extremism per se as challenges currently facing their communities. Instead, most respondents pointed to socio-economic and governance issues, including:

- Low literacy and education rates (especially among women) and a high rate of school dropouts
- Limited or no understanding of religious texts owing to the limited amount of mosques and Islamic teachings/reading material available in the community
- A feeling that their religion is ‘under threat’ – one respondent stated that the stereotyping of Muslims as terrorists has led to distrust, discrimination and misconceptions about Islam, while others expressed their fear of practising Islam freely in the community<sup>19</sup>
- Multidimensional poverty – under- and unemployment were frequently mentioned by respondents, together with underdevelopment, competition over limited resources (such as land and housing), lack of capital to start small businesses and lack of markets to sell agricultural produce
- A sense of grievance towards and limited confidence in government, including grievances against security actors – this sense was particularly focused on development programmes not reaching youth, the inequitable distribution of resources provided by government programmes, the absence of basic service delivery in local communities, and being targeted by law enforcement (for example, Muslim women reported being suspected of hiding weapons in their clothes and feeling humiliated by male officers’ removing their veils at police stations)<sup>20</sup>

These local challenges are widely recognised as major risk factors for radicalisation to violent extremism.<sup>21</sup> In

addition, the respondents pointed to issues that have the potential to develop into fault lines that could be exploited by violent extremist groups.

Across the focus groups, respondents agreed that there was trust within identity groupings. However, young men (both Muslim and non-Muslim) reported that ongoing leadership conflicts within the Muslim community caused tensions and divisions within the identity group. This was attributed to the different ideologies of Shia and Salafi Muslims.<sup>22</sup>

Little to no trust was reported between Muslims and Christians and between different ethnicities, which has affected the level of business and social integration within communities. Some groups stated that community members only socialise and do business with people from the same identity group because discrimination within the community has bred tension (especially over resources).<sup>23</sup>

Little to no trust was reported between Muslims and Christians and between different ethnicities

Young, female Muslims reported that they are discouraged from associating and making friends with non-Muslims, while young Muslim men reported that the concept of Muslim brotherhood requires that Muslims socialise and work only with each other.<sup>24</sup>

Women from the mixed faith group said that they did not like interacting with Muslims because Muslims think they are superior to people of other religions.<sup>25</sup>

There was a sense that community discussions were restricted to the involvement of adult men. The role of women at the meetings was reported to be ‘mobilising and cooking food’, with Muslim women stating that ‘we cannot freely participate due to our dress code and other religious restrictions’.<sup>26</sup>

In general, youth felt that they have no voice or platform to share their ideas and opinions, that community discussion spaces are closed to them, and that they are scared to bring their ideas to meetings for fear of being punished by their elders.

The communities do, however, also demonstrate protective factors that can be leveraged for resilience against violent extremism.

Some groups reported that there is integration among those who had been born or lived in the same area.<sup>27</sup> These respondents feel that they want to develop together and need each other to succeed.

Women in particular spoke of integrating across identity groups in an attempt to form savings groups in order to share development ideas and borrow money to invest in their businesses.

Muslim and Christian adult men reported that they meet to discuss issues such as government programmes, family matters, inter-faith problems, fundraising, business opportunities and development. A representative of the Buganda Kingdom explained that these meetings often result in issues being addressed because of the amplified voices from different people fighting for the same cause.<sup>28</sup>

A respondent from the Muslim Centre for Justice and Law pointed out that the levels of trust between identity groups, specifically religious groups, increase if they have had some sort of working relationship or collaboration with each other. He said that '[t]rust is an integral part of

community engagement ... but one that does not occur naturally and without concerted and sustained efforts'.<sup>29</sup>

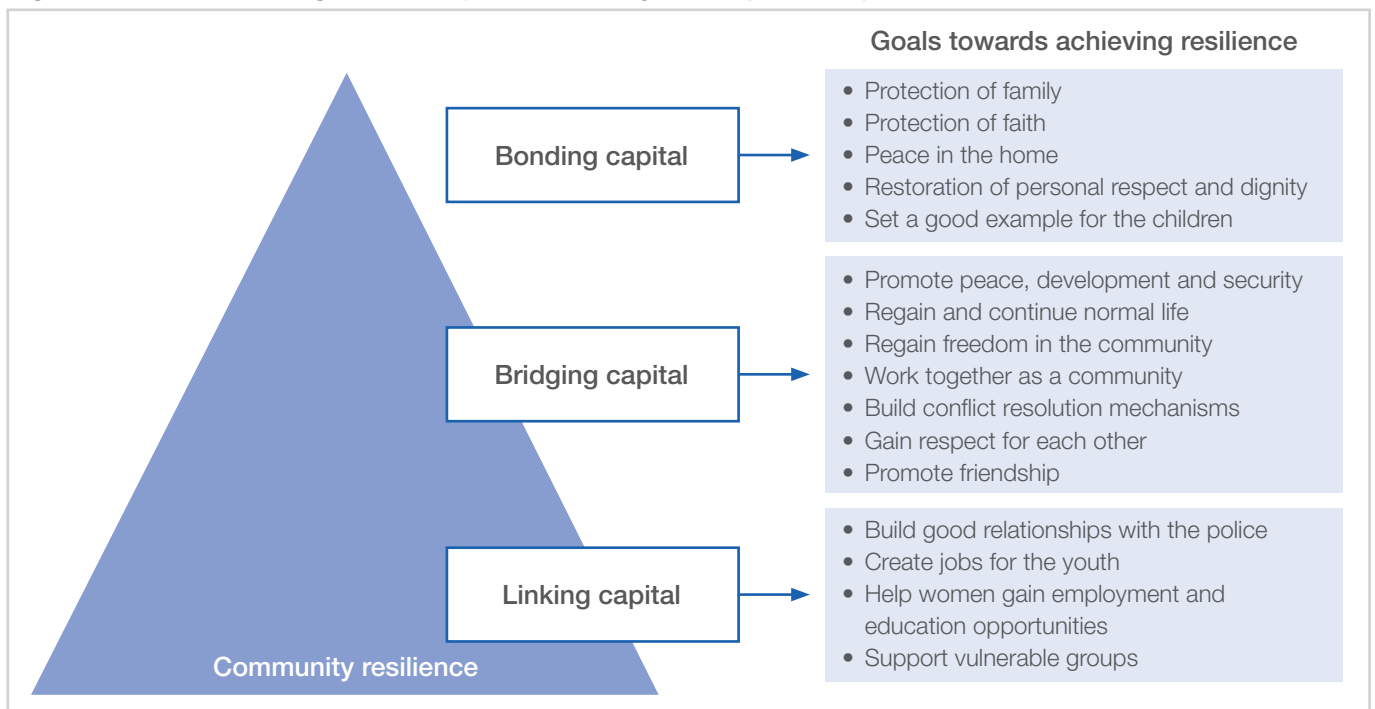
Communities need to be encouraged to be aware of their social environment and use that information to collectively and inclusively identify problems and develop solutions to those problems.

Levels of trust between identity groups increase if they have had some sort of working relationship with each other

Respondents' assessment of their own community dynamics, challenges and strengths reinforces the argument that interventions should not only focus on finding solutions to what the community has identified as stressors/challenges. Instead, they should also focus on strengthening identified protective factors, as both will build resilience to potential threats and act as a deterrent to radicalisation.

This was reflected in respondents' formulation of the goals the community should have in building resilience (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Goals in building resilience (as identified by the respondents)**



Source: Author compilation with data collected from focus group discussions

With these goals in mind, respondents suggested various strategies they felt would work in their communities by tapping into existing strengths to build resilience, including:<sup>30</sup>

- Strengthening social support networks: forming inclusive social groups and holding charity events
- Collaborating with community organisations: developing community radio programmes on peace and development and access to counselling services from relevant NGOs
- Enhancing community resources: forming business associations and savings groups across identity groups, developing employment or business opportunities for the youth, implementing vocational skills programmes and involving the youth in government development programmes
- Increasing community safety: improving relations between the police and the community through joint meetings, activities and events, and holding regular community meetings to discuss common problems and develop joint solutions
- Building collective identity: holding community dialogues, socialising and building trust through sports events, sensitising the community through door-to-door visits, and holding interfaith activities and dialogues
- Training and education: training religious leaders on peace and conflict resolution, teaching non-discrimination on religious grounds and providing training on parenting skills to build strong family relations and empower parents and children

Human rights violations by security actors can strengthen the resolve of individuals to join violent extremist groups

An approach that focuses on building community strengths and resilience will, necessarily, develop and enhance the factors that keep communities safeguarded from the threat of radicalisation to violent extremism.

Especially in a context where violent extremism is not the major threat facing communities (but where conditions conducive to violent extremism do exist), the emphasis

should be on promoting social cohesion through dialogue, tolerance, peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

It is also important to improve relationships between the community and security agencies and so strengthen the legitimacy of rule-of-law institutions, and to support the development and implementation of good governance measures.

Dialogue is one of the tools that promote social cohesion and resilience against violent extremism, and it deserves deeper examination in the context of local communities in Uganda.

## Community dialogue in response to violent extremism

### What does dialogue represent?

In the context of P/CVE, dialogue is presumed to entail a direct move towards negotiations between the state and violent extremist groups. While this has been proposed in other studies on addressing violent extremism in East Africa and the Horn,<sup>31</sup> this report examines the idea of dialogue through the lens of P/CVE interaction in three main ways:

- Within and between local communities
- Between local communities and security entities
- Between local communities and justice actors

Intra- and inter-community tensions, whether on religious, ethnic or socio-political issues, are counter-productive in enhancing cohesion and resilience. Violent extremist groups exploit religion, whether Christianity for the LRA or Islam for the ADF, in order to achieve the multiple outcomes of prejudice and physical violence.

Similarly, a strained rapport between local communities and security agencies complicates any possibility of cooperation between the two. Studies have shown that human rights violations by security actors can strengthen the resolve of individuals to join violent extremist groups.<sup>32</sup>

Where communities do not perceive legitimacy in the justice sector or accountability in the provision of justice, efforts aimed at addressing violent extremism or the associated risks associated are undermined. In other words, an effective criminal justice system is a key tool in the fight against this scourge.<sup>33</sup>



Even if the complicated and often sensitive undertaking of initiating dialogue with violent extremist groups is to be tested, the starting point would have to be community consultation.

Communities bear the worst impact of terror attacks and their insights into the workings of violent extremist groups are crucial. Their perspectives are also essential in shaping the outlines of dialogue as a complementary component of P/CVE.

### **Community perspectives on what complicates dialogue**

Two issues were identified as challenges facing community members.

Firstly, the majority of respondents noted that there are no public or communal platforms that facilitate dialogue among community members. Although a few individuals pointed to institutions such as the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council and the Church of Uganda, the general lack of awareness by others highlights a problem.

Some informal meetings do occur, but these are ad hoc and lack the kind of structure that can guide the constructive mobilisation of community members or opinion in an organised manner.

There is a similar absence of platforms that foster dialogue between community members and security and justice actors. Some respondents noted that there are local meetings organised by the Gombolola Internal Security Officers (GISOs), but that some youth avoid them. To some degree, this underscores a problem of trust.

Although GISOs – more generally referred to as ISOs – maintain a campaign against criminality, they also gather intelligence on security trends in communities.<sup>34</sup> Compounding the distrustful relationship between communities and GISOs is the fact that the latter have in the past been accused of corruption.<sup>35</sup>

The second challenge is the multiple fallouts of the strained relationship (or lack of one) between communities and security agencies, as well as the justice sector.

The FGDs comprising men and women of both the Christian and Muslim faiths indicate that security agencies disrespect and humiliate men in front of their families. There are recurrent incidents of wrongful arrests and several accounts of harassment by the police.<sup>36</sup>

It was observed that the police in Kampala have tried to initiate engagements with members of the community with a view to creating awareness about relevant legal, crime, safety and radicalisation-related issues. This was confirmed in an interview at the Kawempe Division of the Uganda Police Force.<sup>37</sup>

While such efforts are gradually gaining momentum, progress is slow as the challenges in communities remain.

An FGD of young women said they face sexual harassment whenever they try to report issues to security personnel.<sup>38</sup> In addition to young women being humiliated by having their religious veils stripped off, there are also not enough women police officers to handle women-related cases.<sup>39</sup>

Another FGD of young men noted how the police usually demand money whenever their assistance is requested.<sup>40</sup> Young Muslim men in particular are misperceived by security agencies as criminals, while some are misjudged as potential terrorists and arrested.<sup>41</sup>

The majority of respondents noted that there are no public platforms that facilitate dialogue among community members

When communities are mistreated by security agencies, the justice sector should be an institutional point of reference for accountability. Yet while efforts are being made by judicial actors, many gaps still exist.

Men and women of both the Christian and Muslim faiths again attest to problems ranging from delayed justice in court to corruption.<sup>42</sup> While a weak response from justice actors is common, women particularly feel the impact of injustice as many of them cannot afford the legal fees charged by lawyers.<sup>43</sup>

Respondents in general also lament the highly bureaucratic character of the justice system and how this results in the delayed delivery of justice.

In addition, some judicial actors have been accused of sexual harassment of young women.<sup>44</sup>

One of the consequences of this collective challenge linked to the justice system is the recourse to mob justice by some youth. This may not be unconnected with the

fact that many young people find it difficult to get justice in court. Respondents further noted that when bail requirements are met and an accused is acquitted, the court does not refund bail fees.

### **Community perspectives on the possibility of dialogue**

Beyond the highlighted challenges, individuals in local communities, as well as those in the security and justice sectors, are aware of ideas that can point towards solutions.

With regard to the justice, law and order sector, technical personnel are responsible for overseeing issues of transitional justice. Prosecutors at the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions noted that such personnel also seek to engage religious and cultural leaders in the context of transitional justice processes.<sup>45</sup>

The prospects of dialogue among concerned actors would certainly benefit from measures that ensure progress in community healing in the context of transitional justice.

Religious and traditional institutions are an indispensable part of a society's resilience framework, because in most settings their historical origins give them the level of legitimacy needed to mobilise communities.<sup>46</sup>

In terms of members of violent extremist groups, dialogue should be explored alongside state responses

The mobilisation of ideas and community members must, however, be guided towards the constructive course of preventing individuals from joining violent extremist groups.

Religious leaders are pivotal in this regard and Islamic clerics in particular cannot be overlooked. They are familiar with the essential doctrinal elements needed to deconstruct the narratives pushed by groups such as al-Shabaab and the ADF.

NGOs such as the Muslim Centre for Justice and Law emphasise that the momentum towards dialogue is an

opportunity for the state and communities to negotiate a new social contract.<sup>47</sup>

Furthermore, in terms of members of violent extremist groups, dialogue should be explored alongside state responses. Preliminary discussions on this issue should identify potential interlocutors and mediators who can facilitate this process.

Some NGOs in the communities have played a crucial role in establishing rapport with individuals who espouse ideas inspired by these groups. In some instances, positive alternatives – including vocational skills training with start-up capital – have been presented to these individuals.

These views on the possibility of dialogue with violent extremist groups are not exclusive to the NGO community. Religious, traditional and local council leaders feel this is an undertaking worth investigating, albeit in a systematic manner.

### **Conclusion**

As the threats posed by violent extremism evolve in East Africa, countries such as Uganda constantly need to think of ways to adapt and enhance local capacities. Uganda may not face the same persistent pressure from attacks as some of its neighbours, but risk factors should not be ignored.

The focus of this study has been on distinct but complementary approaches to addressing and preventing violent extremism at the local community level. These relate to the process through which communities build resilience, and the extent to which the same communities can profit from dialogue in their interactions with security and justice actors.

Both of these approaches offer alternatives to the traditional P/CVE tools in response to the complex risk factors contributing to insecurity in affected communities. They also have the potential to address more than just violent extremism, including broader conflict and development challenges.

Uganda has a unique opportunity and space to respond in such a way that it can set a constructive example for the region.

## Notes

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