



POLICY BRIEF

iDovers working for peace in a COVID-19 world

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The African Union's iDove initiative provides a youth-led platform for peacebuilders in Africa, Asia and Europe. Drawing on the soft power of religion, it aims to foster creative approaches to the prevention of violent extremism. This policy brief explores the sustainability of the iDove approach in Africa, and identifies opportunities for the initiative as the continent struggles with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key findings

- ▶ Since the launch of the iDove initiative in 2017, a growing number of organisations led by and focused on youth have adopted intra/interfaith approaches in their efforts to prevent violent extremism. The approach is driven by the need to nurture inclusion at scale in the vulnerable communities affected by religious radicalisation and extremism.
- ▶ Because of restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the heavy reliance on face-to-face interactions by iDovers necessitated a shift to mostly virtual interactions. This prompted a need to adapt the iDove initiative and its approaches, e.g. the AU-iDove Training Manual, for digital use during and post-pandemic.
- ▶ At secretariat level, the iDove Cross-Border Messaging Program was launched during the pandemic, targeting at least six countries in East and Central Africa, suggesting the iDove initiative's potential adaptability.

Recommendations

- ▶ iDove should move its intra/interfaith agenda forward by integrating it into continental policy frameworks and encouraging member states to support the initiative. It is an opportune time for AU member states to take the lead and demonstrate technical and financial commitment to local iDovers. Member state inclusion is profoundly dependent on the secretariat's efforts. However, commitment by member states can improve the relevance of the iDove initiative and the urgency of including young people in prevention of violent extremism (PVE) efforts.
- ▶ Existing tools such as the iDove Training Manual should be adapted to new challenges presented by COVID-19. The manual should be updated to enhance the capacity of iDovers and their work in an increasingly virtual world. In addition, despite funding challenges for iDovers across Africa, the African Union (AU) Commission should enlarge the reach of its cross-border programme for iDovers to include all five geographical regions of the continent.
- ▶ iDovers should better coordinate their efforts, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the enhanced use of communication technology. The iDove network needs to adapt to emerging technological realities. There is an urgent need to modernise grassroots-led intra/interfaith dialogue. iDovers should champion the quick adoption of communication-based technology within their communities, especially rural and remote ones.
- ▶ iDovers should intensify efforts to mainstream their role in intra/interfaith dialogue as part of the continent's youth, peace and security agenda. They should be involved with other initiatives, like the broader AU Youth 4 Peace Africa network. Networking and collaborating with other young peacebuilders could enhance the effectiveness and quality of their work.
- ▶ iDovers need to continue collaborating on projects among themselves. In the past, this has proved useful in augmenting not only their day-to-day operations but their networks and their reach.

Introduction

Religion and faith play a dual role in the maintenance of global and regional stability and order. On the one hand, some faith-inspired groups contribute to protracted conflicts worldwide, and Africa experiences a significant portion of them. On the other hand, in search of long-term and inclusive solutions, religious establishments have increasingly assumed a central role in resolving conflicts and dealing with the aftermath of crises.

Particularly, intra/interfaith dialogues have become prominent, especially with regard to countering violent extremism. This method, though under-utilised, has the potential to bolster non-violent mechanisms for conflict prevention and resolution to engage youth and religious leaders of diverse faiths.

Generally, the youth remain an abundant resource for conflict prevention and resolution. They are often vital agents of social change, economic growth and innovation, mainly when a platform is provided for them to share ideas and build networks and partnerships.¹ However, unemployment and economic grievances, the socio-cultural impact of violent conflict, a lack of access to education and the absence of proper support systems, among other issues, undercut their role as champions of peace.

Moreover, these problems can result in their exclusion from critical processes and even push some of them to become perpetrators of violence. Their frequent participation in violent extremism is partially the result of a lack of access to opportunities that expose them to the benefits of inclusive ingenuities towards preventing violent extremism (PVE). Conscious of this, the African Union (AU) Commission's Civil Society and Diaspora Directorate (AUC-CIDO) and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH jointly launched the Interfaith Dialogue on Violent Extremism (iDove) initiative in 2017.

iDove's objective is to provide a youth-led platform for young peacebuilders (aged 18-35) in Africa, Asia and Europe to collaborate and foster creative approaches to PVE, drawing on the soft power of religion. The intra/interfaith focus of the iDove initiative sheds a spotlight on the potential of the wide reach of Africa's youth, peace and security agenda. It offers young

men and women the chance to intensify their activities in communities with different religious and cultural backgrounds to listen, discuss, learn, build and sustain peaceful relations amid rising tensions.

As part of the iDove initiative, young Africans have been exposed to in-person and virtual training workshops, conferences and exchange programmes, all targeted at enhancing their existing skills. These have included four intercontinental youth forums, a virtual hackathon, small-scale projects, trainings of trainers, and seven iDove Africa Cross-Border Messaging projects in East and Central Africa.

Generally, the youth remain an abundant resource for conflict prevention and resolution

Despite this support, challenges remain regarding the impact of these activities on target communities and the intra/interfaith-approach discourse. This policy brief outlines these challenges and specific trends that relate to iDove projects on the continent. Particular attention is paid to the way participating organisations and youth describe their interventions, their intra/interfaith approaches to PVE, the impact of COVID-19 on their work and their strategies for 'pandemic-proof' operations for the future.

Methodology

To meet the paper's objectives, the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) adopted qualitative research approaches. In addition to a desktop review of secondary data, virtual interviews were used as well as an email survey questionnaire with iDovers in the African region. At least 20 iDove-affiliated youth organisations participated in this study. These organisations were operating from Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda.

As part of this policy brief, the ISS collected data on PVE efforts since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant impact of their activities on a local and regional level to date. In preparation for the virtual research interviews, the ISS undertook

background research on the subject matter and identified stakeholders to engage with. This included young practitioners from the iDove network, personnel working on PVE and affiliated with AU member state governments, and personnel from the secretariat of the iDove initiative in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Additionally, a critical review of literature about the current youth and PVE discourse was undertaken. This included, but was not limited to, reviewing key documents (including domestic and regional legal instruments) on any such initiatives and assessing the status of enforcement.

Though the iDove community is made up of young practitioners in Africa, Asia and Europe, the research for this policy brief was limited to its African participants.

Youth preventing violent extremism in Africa

Like all young peacebuilders in Africa, iDovers work within the ambit of the AU's Continental Framework for Youth, Peace and Security. The framework, adopted by the AU's Peace and Security Council in 2020, recognises PVE as a crucial matter requiring contributions from Africa's youth.² In that regard, iDovers, with their contributions that encompass interventions towards enhancing PVE at the community level, are part of a more extensive 'Youth 4 Peace' network that works towards silencing the guns on the continent.

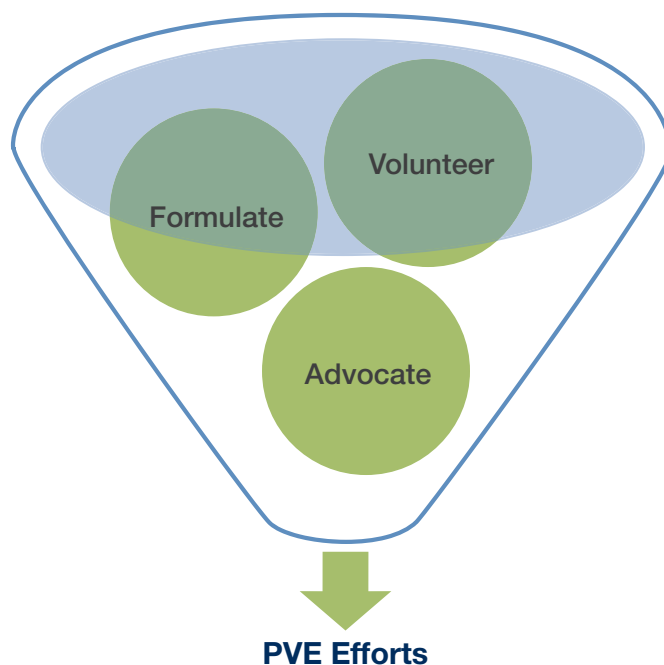
Intra/interfaith dialogue is key to boosting the prospects of creating and sustaining a peaceful society

The aim of PVE activities is to develop resilience among communities that might be vulnerable to violent extremism.³ In Africa, such communities are largely made up of young people. In most cases, as seen in the Sahel and Horn of Africa, these are unemployed and underemployed young men and women dissatisfied with the current state of governance and socio-economic conditions in their nation.

The conventional narrative has it that these young people are prone to being targeted by extremist groups' recruitment drives and are responsible for grave violations of human rights. However, their potential to contribute towards effective PVE is equally underestimated.

According to youth groups that participated in this study, the roles and contributions of youth in PVE can be summarised in the three points illustrated below.

Chart 1: Youth roles in PVE



Source: African iDovers⁴

- Volunteer to join the security sector: Several youth groups believe that youth should increasingly volunteer to join the security sector, especially as soldiers or police officers.⁵ This speaks to the urgent imperative of debunking the notion of youth as the muscle of violent extremist groups. These groups offer special incentives which often deter young people from joining government-linked law enforcement, though they are generally eligible to join the security sector as early as 18 years old.⁶
- Contribute to early warning efforts and policymaking: Young people tend to be very conversant about the needs of their communities and are knowledgeable about the physical terrain. They are innovative and tech-savvy, making them the most efficient sources and disseminators of crucial information that enables communities and the security sector to act appropriately on early warning signs and timely enough to avert any dangers. In this respect, one iDover stated that 'We do not want to be labelled as informants. We know many people in our communities sympathise with jihadists. However, the authorities need to know that they can rely on us.'

- Formulate start-ups and capacity building: Young people, even in areas prone to violent extremism, are keen and can excel at starting businesses and other income-generating initiatives. This contributes to PVE efforts by addressing the socio-economic challenges unleashed by poverty and under/unemployment. Research for this policy brief revealed that some iDovers embarked on new business-like ventures in their communities to engage their fellow youth and to keep them busy. As one respondent stated, 'Idle youth engage in violent extremism!'⁷

Unemployed youth who are dissatisfied with the current state of governance and socio-economic conditions have fallen prey to extremist groups

Other responses from the email questionnaire shared with African iDovers shed light on the extent to which grassroots communities can access digital infrastructure, primarily to engage in youth-led PVE sensitisation initiatives. Access to digital infrastructure remains predominantly out of the reach of many communities in Africa, even those in urban settings.

The iDove community has identified a relatively accessible digital platform to carry out their work during the pandemic: smartphone-accessed social media platforms. The use of smartphones is widespread in Africa. Despite high internet costs, platforms such as WhatsApp are popular. Groups on WhatsApp have been initiated to carry out advocacy campaigns for many youth groups.⁸ This can bring wide-reaching benefits for PVE despite the lack of face-to-face interactions.

iDovers also noted that partnerships amongst themselves as youth-led organisations and groups is essential for the sustainability of their efforts. They are keen on cross-border collaborations. Such experiences are anticipated to encourage the exploration of new projects with diverse actors and approaches.⁹

In sum, iDovers tend to have a greater awareness of the need to adapt to emerging challenges. The consensus amongst these young people is that the pandemic has not made the work 'hard to manage'. Instead, it has allowed them to diversify their efforts in order to connect and serve their communities.¹⁰

The key: intra/interfaith dialogue

Intra/interfaith dialogue is key to boosting the prospects of creating and sustaining a peaceful society. It is also an increasingly accepted response to conflicts with religious dimensions and undertones where religious doctrines and teachings become instruments to drive political and socio-economic goals through violence.

While practitioners employ a variety of approaches, intra/interfaith dialogues are popular, especially when it comes to enhancing religious tolerance and promoting peaceful coexistence. They are intensely dependent on formal

February 2017

THE AFRICAN UNION AND
ITS PARTNERS
LAUNCHED THE
iDOVE PROJECT

and informal human interactions at both the individual and institutional levels. Furthermore, one of their most important goals is building and maintaining relationships to nurture the sustainability of existing and future interventions.

The practice is credited with gaining formal recognition in 1965, owing to actions by Arthur Sheiner's Appeal to Conscience Foundation.¹¹ Earlier initiatives in Europe and the Americas can be traced as far back as 1900. Today, intra/interfaith dialogue has evolved into an agenda co-driven by elites such as influential imams, clergy, politicians and grassroots activists.

On the African continent, before the establishment of the iDove initiative, intra/interfaith dialogue received formal recognition by the AU during its consultative meeting on Agenda 2063 that called for the engagement of faith-based organisations in policymaking. It was also recognised in the Common African Position document that calls for inclusive people-centred development.¹²

Intra/interfaith dialogues are popular, especially when it comes to enhancing religious tolerance and promoting peaceful coexistence

The African approach is unique in its inclusion of traditional leaders within intra/interfaith dialogue, and the youth are most important for this policy brief. As part of the iDove platform, younger intra/interfaith dialogue practitioners have been exposed to in-person and virtual training workshops, conferences and exchange programmes to enhance their existing skills. These have included four intercontinental youth forums, a virtual hackathon, small-scale projects, trainings of trainers and seven Africa Cross-Border Messaging projects in East and Central Africa.

The impact thus far has resulted in iDovers continuing to heed the call to contribute to peace and security-related policy formulation by local, national and regional authorities. They are also advocating for platforms to share their own experiences and thoughts on inclusive policies. Through their organisations and networks, they meet and discuss emerging issues on PVE and share their communiqués with policy- and decision-makers.

The iDove platform is becoming increasingly popular in the Southern Africa region. This comes as no surprise as violent extremism is on the rise in northern Mozambique. A respondent operating in the Cabo Delgado region of the Southern African country stressed the need to include more Mozambican youth on the iDove platform. They remain key to initiating intra/interfaith dialogue and boosting the weak early warning system.¹³

In order to understand why the AU adopted an intra/interfaith approach when dealing with continent-wide youth and PVE aspirations, it was necessary to reach out to a pioneering member of the iDove platform. In an interview with Eiman Kheir, dubbed the 'Mother of iDove' by the iDove community:¹⁴

'The interfaith approach was key to iDove because faith and religion have always been a powerful connector of people across borders.

INTRA/INTERFAITH
DIALOGUE AND IDOVE FORM
PART OF THE AU'S

Agenda 2063

Their value is evident in the golden rule of treating others like you wish to be treated or within principles such as empathetic listening and dialogue, which are important human skills that strengthen, inspire, and empower individuals and communities.

‘There is no better place to practice the skills of dialogue than in interfaith and PVE, because while there are many shared values in faith, the differences can be complex and tend to run deeper than other topics. PVE continues to be fuelled by unlearned knowledge of one’s religion and that of their neighbours. We try to challenge rigid identities (polarised and radicalised) through interfaith to build diverse and inclusive beings and societies.’

The iDove platform’s most powerful tool yet, the Training of Trainers manual of youth and PVE, is fundamental for the platform’s sustainability, even through a pandemic. The manual equips trainers with key resources to adopt for successful intra/interfaith interventions and appropriate ways in which trainees can communicate and respond to challenges posed by violent extremism in their target communities.¹⁵ The training focuses exclusively on prevention rather than on any other attributes of the violent extremism conundrum. It aims to support youth in preventing violent extremism in their communities by providing them with the tools and, thus, confidence to start that process.

The manual assumes that the youth receiving the training would be either already engaged in intra/interfaith work in their communities or are interested in becoming more involved in (or establishing) such initiatives. The standardised approach offered by the manual will enable users to remain or become more effective and productive. However the manual must adapt to the new realities of the pandemic. It requires revision to enable it to be utilised virtually.

The African approach is unique in its inclusion of traditional leaders within intra/interfaith dialogue, but youth participation is lacking

COVID-19 and the intra/interfaith approach

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, iDovers were already working in a challenging environment. Youth leadership in the intra/interfaith field, especially in Africa, lack important endorsement by local and national authorities. This directly affects the human and financial resources at their disposal to fulfil their mandates.

Before the launch of the platform, between 2013 and 2016, the continent, particularly the western region, experienced an outbreak of the Ebola virus. In addition to an alarming and grave loss of life, it came with socio-economic challenges for states like Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also brought such challenges, even for youth-led organisations. For iDovers, it is no longer business as usual, despite the urgent need to contribute to sustaining PVE efforts in their communities.



iDOVE IS MORE VISIBLE IN SOUTHERN AFRICA SINCE THE RISE OF TERRORISM IN MOZAMBIQUE

iDovers responding to surveys identified five key challenges that have resulted from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic:

- Projects had to cease, pause, cut down or transform. The pandemic created a complex implementation environment where it would not be business as usual.
- For iDovers, reaching stakeholders became more arduous due to lockdown restrictions imposed by most African governments. The switch to operating virtually remains a challenge due to funding availability and access to sufficient infrastructure and other essential technology.
- Securing funds became a challenge. Rumours were spreading in the PVE 'world' that funding for activities would take a back seat as health-related projects, especially those dealing with COVID-19, became a priority.
- Connecting with others on the iDove network has become overwhelmingly virtual. Most respondents noted that they missed face-to-face interactions and various networking sessions that they had used to exchange ideas and experiences and to nurture partnerships.
- Nurturing the values and practices associated with intra/interfaith dialogue has been difficult. There is no focus on planning for trainings, even virtual ones, to keep the momentum going on interfaith engagements, especially during a pandemic.¹⁶

Due to COVID-19, it is no longer business as usual for iDovers despite the urgent need to contribute to sustaining PVE efforts in communities

Despite these challenges, at least 80% of responding iDovers claimed to have adapted to their new ways of working and were hopeful of experiencing positive impact stories in the future.

During the height of the pandemic, in October 2020, the AU launched the Africa Cross Border Messaging Program. This initiative aims to enable African iDovers to establish strategic communications and interventions that enhance critical thinking and problem solving to mitigate against violence within cross-border communities.

The programme launched seven projects in East and Central Africa: one each in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Uganda, Sudan, Tanzania and two in Kenya. The fundamental goal for these projects was for iDovers to build social cohesion by utilising a variety of activities and methods, including visual art, gaming, social media and radio campaigns, with storytelling techniques targeting women, youth and religious and community leaders.



iDOVE ADOPTED THE 'COOL IMAM' CONCEPT TO CHANGE PERCEPTIONS ABOUT RELIGIOUS LEADERS

iDove activities under the Cross Border programmes in 2020-2021

- 1) Kwale County Kenya – Harnessing the potential of traditional storytelling to prevent violent extremism and close the generation gap between traditional leaders/religious leaders and youth.
- 2) El Wak/Madera Kenya/Somalia – Imaamka Baarbata ‘Young Imam’ social media series targeting young people to enhance their resilience to radical influences, utilising young religious leaders to educate, inspire and challenge them to take ownership of narratives around peacebuilding.
- 3) Bugiri District – ‘Our Voices’ project targeting women, building their capacity to respond to the increasing threat of violent extremism through improving their critical thinking and empowering them using drama and theatre to create awareness-raising messages in their communities.
- 4) Kassala and Gadarif – The power of gaming to prevent violent extremism. A population of youth and religious leaders were trained in board games to develop critical thinking on PVE and to build social cohesion and tolerance.
- 5) North and South Kivu – Joint project on strengthening community resilience against violent extremism and radicalisation through inclusive leadership and the promotion of tolerance. This was advocated through counselling, community dialogues, art competitions and religious leaders’ workshops.
- 6) Tandahima and Mtwara District – Sauti Moja ‘One Voice’ campaign targeting social and cultural change of mentalities among religious youth communities by empowering them to speak in one voice. This was implemented through a variety of activities, including trainings, workshops with religious clerics, and social media and radio campaigns.
- 7) Macimboa da Praia, Mocojo & Mtwara district of Tanzania – Strengthening the capacity of youth in conflict prevention and peacebuilding: The REFLECT approach to PVE. It was established through peace committees conducting localised trainings and workshops.



Source: African Union

Through the ‘Cool Imam’ approach, the iDovers aimed to change the general misconception of religious leaders as stern and backward-thinking through activities that adapt youth to normative language and technological skills to close the intergenerational gap.

Conclusion

Pandemics are an unforeseen hurdle for progressive efforts towards peace on the continent. The current COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down the efforts of the iDove community. However, it has prompted iDovers to enhance their innovativeness when carrying out their work. Their collaborations with the initiative secretariat and their fellow members have seen most of them continue their work despite COVID-19-related national restrictions since 2019.

Pandemics are an unforeseen hurdle for progressive efforts towards peace and security on the continent

The iDove initiative has steered youth and PVE by encouraging virtual interactions to sustain engagements across the continent. Like any other human security-related initiative, iDove now needs to overhaul the engine of youth innovation to allow for an organic spread of more innovative solutions to the challenges of operating during

Acknowledgements

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a pandemic and to continue to engage sensitive yet significant intra/interfaith stakeholders.

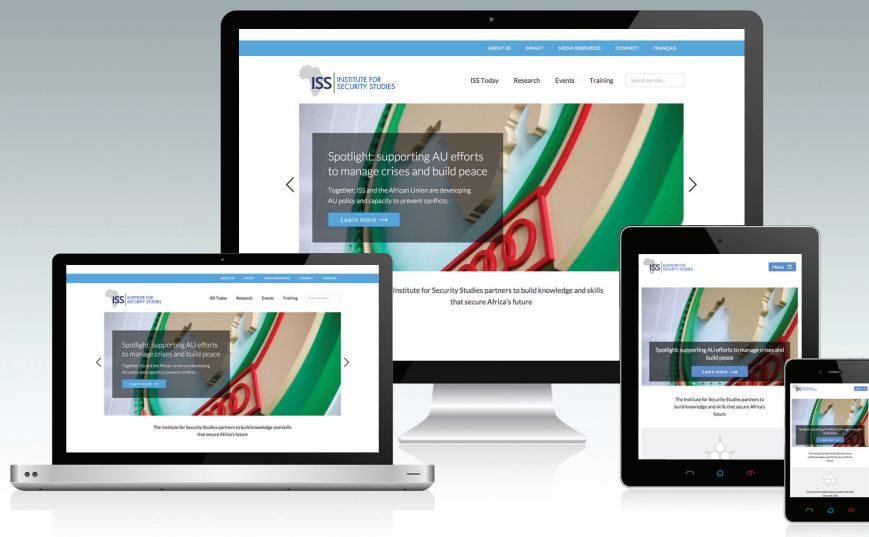
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