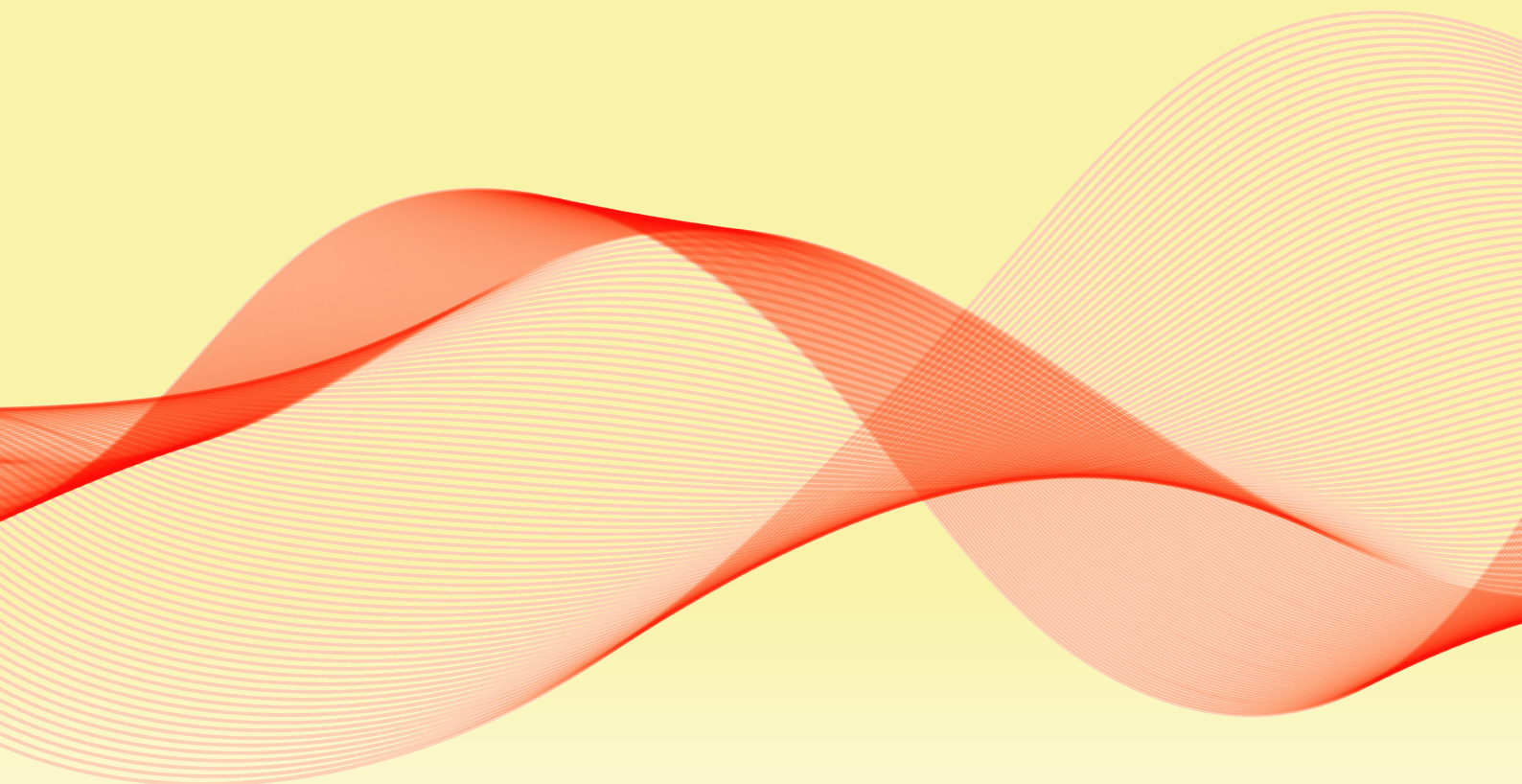


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Community-centered collaboration to prevent and counter violent extremism

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About this Brief

This policy brief draws from discussions during the USAID Sauti National Conference held on 12th and 13th March 2024. It examines the progress and barriers in implementing whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) in Kwale, Kilifi, Mombasa, and Lamu counties. Key reflections include addressing trust deficits between communities and security agencies, co-creating intervention programs, ensuring sustainability, including gender and youth, and prioritising mental health.

Hosted by Centre for Human Rights and Policy Studies (CHRIPS), Mercy Corps, and the Kenya School of Government, the conference gathered 43 participants from state agencies, civil society, academia, and policy-making. This brief summarises the discussions and insights from the conference, providing an overview of PCVE policy and programming challenges and progress.

Introduction

Violent extremism is a growing transnational threat that demands multi-faceted prevention and countering interventions. The threat landscape continuously evolves at local, regional, and global levels. In Eastern Africa, Al-Shabaab (AS) remains the primary actor impacting Kenya's national and regional security. In 2012, AS pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda (AQ). Other actors in the region include affiliates of the Islamic State (IS), such as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), operating in the Uganda-Congo borderland. Additionally, the insurgency in the Cabo Delgado region of Mozambique, led by Ansa Al-Sunna, which emerged in 2017, shares ideological aspirations with AS and draws inspiration from radical ideologies from the Kenyan Coast.

in Kilifi, Kwale, Mombasa, and Lamu, common socioeconomic and political factors have contributed to increased radicalisation and recruitment to violent extremist (VE) groups, including Al Shabaab

and the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS). These include prolonged unresolved conflicts, ethnic, national and religious discrimination, historical hostilities between identity groups, political exclusion, socio-economic marginalisation, poor governance, repression, corruption, unemployment, inequality in access to resources and services, lack of rule of law and human rights violations.¹

The presence of charismatic recruiters, social networks with VE associations, the spread of appealing ideologies through traditional and online media and the promise of monetary and other social incentives also enable recruitment into VE groups in these counties. Individual economic and social incentives such as monetary enticements, a sense of purpose, adventure, belonging, acceptance, status, and individual psychological characteristics, like non-resilience to problems, susceptibility to external influences and emotional instability, further explain direct involvement in violent extremist activities

Given the complexity of violent extremism across the four counties, collaboration among multiple state and non-state actors is critical. Partnership in designing PCVE responses is essential; thus, whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches are still relevant in the Kenyan context.² The launch of the National Strategy to Countering Violent Extremism (NSCVE) in 2016 marked a policy shift by the Kenyan government from a hard-power counterterrorism stance to incorporating soft-power interventions.³ This strategy was extended to the counties with the launch of 47 County Actions Plans (CAPS), which expanding the space for whole-of-society and whole-of-government approaches to PCVE. These evolving policy interventions have incorporated soft power approaches by leveraging the strengths and contributions of multiple actors in the prevention realm, combining traditional security policies with development approaches.

This brief explores several reflections on PCVE policy and programming relevant to policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and academics. It

1 See also GCTS 2006; James Khalil and Martine Zeuthen, "Countering Violent Extremism and Risk Reduction: A Guide to Programme Design and Evaluation," RUSI Whitehall Report 2-16 (London: RUSI, 2016), P.9. https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/20160608_cve_and_rr.combined.online4.pdf

2 Stephens, W., & Sieckelink, S. (2019). Working Across Boundaries in Preventing Violent Extremism: Towards a typology for collaborative arrangements in PVE policy. *Journal for Deradicalization*, (20), 272-313.

3 National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC) (2016). National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism, National Counter Terrorism Centre, Nairobi, <https://counterterrorism.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/National-Strategy-to-Counter-Violent-Extremism-NSCVE-1.pdf>.

4 Ramadhan, R., Ouma, L., Kimari, B. and Mutahi, P. (2023) Assessing the Role of County Engagement Forums in PCVE in Kenya, Centre for Human Rights and Policy Studies, <https://chrips.or.ke/publications/policy-brief/assessing-the-role-of-county-engagement-forums-in-pcve-in-kenya/>.

focuses on implementing Kenya's National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism (NSCVE) and County Action Plans (CAPs), outlining progress and challenges highlighted during the national conference on the whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to PCVE. Challenges include trust deficits between state security actors and communities due to human rights violations and minimal cooperation of security actors and non-state actors. Continuous reflection on effective PCVE programming, aligned with the whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, is necessary to develop more comprehensive, impactful and sustainable strategies to build resilience to violent extremism.

Progress and Challenges

1. Poor mainstreaming of PCVE efforts across national and county government institutions and agencies

One of the major gaps highlighted at the national conference was the poor mainstreaming of PCVE efforts across national and county government institutions. Many public officials outside the Ministry of Interior lack sufficient knowledge about the evolving nature of violent extremism. This is compounded by inadequate resources, both in terms of human capital and funding, due to competing government priorities.

Government involvement in PCVE primarily focuses on security and law enforcement, neglecting other sectors. Agencies often operate in silos, hindering collaboration and leveraging diverse expertise to counter violent extremism comprehensively. A proposed solution is integrating PCVE issues into induction courses at the Kenya School of Government and raising awareness in non-security-oriented ministries.

In counties like Kilifi, Mombasa, Kwale, and Lamu, implementing CAPs and whole-of-society approaches to PCVE varies due to political will, capacity gaps, resource availability, and inclusion of non-state actors like civil society. The Uhuru Kenyatta administration post-2015 demonstrated renewed commitment

through the National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism and a multi-agency approach. Conference discussions emphasised the importance of political will in overcoming challenges and fostering comprehensive PCVE approaches. Future efforts should focus on increasing government engagement and collaboration, learning from county experiences, and ensuring buy-in from critical stakeholders, considering the diverse experiences in designing and implementing CAPs.⁴

2. Inadequate resources for PCVE interventions

In Kilifi, Kwale, Mombasa, and Lamu, PCVE interventions heavily rely on external donor funding, with minimal direct investment from county governments. The integration of PCVE into policy under the County Action Plans (CAPs) has spurred some efforts by county governments, co-chaired by county commissioners. However, county governors have shown limited support for the PCVE agenda. While County commissioners and governors are meant to align national and county-level objectives, policies and initiatives on security and PCVE, the experiences have not been streamlined, and the extent to which this happens varies considerably from county to county.⁵ Security is still largely viewed as a national government function, leading to suboptimal county investment in preventive measures. While most governors attend County Engagement Forum (CEF) meetings, they lack the human and financial resources to support them effectively. In Mombasa, the previous administration established a PCVE directorate under the governor's office. Currently, in Mombasa and the other counties, the PCVE mandate falls under the directorate for peace and cohesion issues.

To ensure sustainability, discussions are underway to integrate PCVE programming into the County Integrated Development Plans (CIDP) across the four counties. This integration aims to secure more resources and align PCVE interventions with county development priorities. Additionally, there are efforts to mainstream PCVE within various national government affirmative funds such as the Uwezo Fund.

5 Kimari, B. (2024) "Holistic Approach to Defend Civic Space and Overhaul the Security Playbook in Kenya,"

<https://chrips.or.ke/publications/research-reports/to-defend-civic-space-and-overhaul-the-security-playbook-in-kenya/>; See also World Bank (2020) *Kenya Accountable Devolution Program. Conflict and Violence Risk Mitigation*, Final Report.

6 Badurdeen, F. A., Aroussi, S., & Jakala, M. (2023). Lived realities and local meaning-making in defining violent extremism in Kenya: implications for preventing and countering violent extremism in policy and practice. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 16(1), 1-22.

Given the heavy reliance on development partners, both the national and county governments must allocate funding to PCVE initiatives to complement external efforts. A notable best practice is the Nairobi City County Prevention of Violent Extremism Act (2022), which marks a significant step in creating local ownership of the PCVE agenda and budgeting internal resources for implementation.

3. Barriers to meaningfully engaging youth in PCVE

Across Kilifi, Kwale, Mombasa, and Lamu, youth involvement in PCVE programming remains insufficient despite their pivotal role. Several barriers hinder their engagement. Firstly, young people's voices are often disregarded in program design and implementation. Their aspirations are inadequately represented in government and civil society interventions. Secondly, language and communication barriers impede effective counter-messaging in PCVE interventions. Current efforts fail to resonate with the youth's idioms of expression and lack contextual understanding of urban versus rural dynamics. Thirdly, youth are predominantly viewed as perpetrators or potential recruits for violent extremism, diminishing their agency and muting their perspectives. This is despite their capacity to contribute to designing innovative PCVE efforts tailored to local realities.

To address these issues, it is crucial to leverage the dynamic knowledge youth have of their communities and the vulnerabilities driving them toward violent extremism. Engaging them in the entire PCVE decision-making cycle, policy development, program implementation, and evaluation processes is essential. This approach shifts from viewing youth merely as informants to active participants in PCVE strategies. In all four counties, meaningful youth involvement in PCVE decision-making processes and actions remain paramount for holistic WoS and WoG programming.

4. Low trust between communities and state agencies

Participants commended the National Counterterrorism Centre (NCTC) for improving coordination on violent extremism issues. However, concerns persist about the securitised approaches employed to address violent extremism. These hard-securitized interventions have led to human rights violations. In Kilifi, Mombasa, Lamu, and Kwale, communities and human rights actors cited instances where frontline agencies, such as the Kenya Anti-Terrorism Police Unit (ATPU), were associated with violations, including arbitrary arrests and negative profiling of communities, particularly those of Islamic faith. This has resulted in the creation of 'suspect communities' viewed uncritically as ethnic and religious enclaves.⁶

Strong community-state interactions are vital in the context of WoG and approaches.⁷ The lack of trust between the government and the communities in these counties hinders desired engagements, especially regarding information sharing around PCVE. Trust deficits have also impeded initiatives like community policing and *Nyumba Kumi* (ten-household structures), which are meant to co-deliver security⁸. Confusion about the membership, roles, and responsibilities of *Nyumba Kumi* due to improper structures and guidelines exacerbates the situation.⁹ Historical mistrust of security agencies further hampers their functioning. *Nyumba Kumi* is often perceived as a tool for gathering information and 'spying'.¹⁰ There have been accusations of police using their relationship with *Nyumba Kumi* leaders to arbitrarily target and kill young people on suspicion of petty crime.¹¹ Additionally, elders and *Nyumba Kumi* members have been targeted and killed for cooperating with security actors in places like Kwale.

Trust-building efforts should focus on collaboration and coordination to deploy comprehensive strategies that enhance community resilience to radicalisation

7 Mwangi, O. G., & Mwangi, C. W. (2024). Securitisation and spaces of terrorism in Kenya's National Police Service counterterrorism discourse. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 17(1), 66-89.

8 Cf. Ruteere, M., & Pommerolle, M. E. (2003). Democratizing security or decentralizing repression? The ambiguities of community policing in Kenya. *African affairs*, 102(409), 587-604.

9 Wamaitha N., N. J. Muthama and Kariuki M. (2019). Effectiveness of the Nyumba Kumi Community Policing Initiative In Kenya. *Journal of Sustainability, Environment and Peace* 1(2) 63-67.

10 Naji, N., & Schildknecht, D. (2024). Containing the 'Suspect' Other: Perpetuating Colonial Spaces Through a Global Counterterrorism Regime in Nairobi. *Geopolitics*, 1-24.

11 Wamaitha N., N. J. Muthama and Kariuki M. (2019). Effectiveness of the Nyumba Kumi Community Policing Initiative in Kenya. *Journal of Sustainability, Environment and Peace* 1(2) 63-67.

and recruitment into violent extremist groups. This approach reflects the soft, desecuritized PCVE strategy.

Moreover, there has also been diminished resource and political support for community structures and platforms created to support peacebuilding and community policing,¹² such as Peace Directorates and District Peace Committees. These integral grassroots conflict mitigation structures have become inactive or ceased to exist entirely due to the loss of direct funding from the national government.¹³

5. Poor local ownership of PCVE policies and interventions

Participants argued that while communities and civil society organisations were consulted in designing the County Action Plans (CAPs) in Kilifi, Kwale, Mombasa, and Lamu counties, the process was predominantly state-led and top-down. This approach resulted in varying levels of public input and limited local ownership in CAP implementation. Many pointed out that PCVE is often seen as the preserve of elite NGOs, sidelining community-based organisations working on peace and security issues.

Historical PCVE programming has used alienating terminologies like “Islamist extremism,” which do not fully encompass other forms of localised violence. Practitioners from Mombasa, for instance, argued that PCVE interventions should address organised criminal groups using similar violent practices within different communities. A participant from Kwale noted that PCVE programmes should also tackle the increase in attacks and killings by juvenile groups. Additionally, residents in the four coastal counties believe state violence should be considered a form of terrorism due to discriminatory security operations targeting the Muslim population.

PCVE programming must respect the contextual perspectives of intended communities in these four counties. Therefore, involving citizens, women, youth, and persons with disabilities is essential to integrate local voices into PCVE interventions.

County Engagement Forums (CEFS) present opportunities to address PCVE-related challenges and innovate on workable solutions to keep communities safe. Programming should also be flexible enough to consider local framing of violent extremism threats and suggest community-driven solutions to overcome the risks.

Community-based organisations and civil society at the local level have substantial experience in peace, security, and development programming. There are similarities between peacebuilding and PCVE providing opportunities for synergy.¹⁴ Consulting these local actors ensures appropriate terminologies and framing of threats, facilitating local ownership of projects and meeting communities’ contextual needs.

6. Low research and analysis to support PCVE programming

The national CVE strategy calls for interventions anchored in robust conceptual approaches and empirical research tailored to specific regions, countries, and local neighbourhoods. County strategies highlight the importance of analysing the prevailing situation of radicalisation, violence, extremism, and CVE efforts to design data-driven solutions. Academics and think tanks in Kenya have conducted critical research on violent extremism including data mapping the threat landscape and exploring emerging dynamics. The CHRIPS CVE observatory hub is a valuable open-source data platform mapping attacks and arrests related to violent extremism in Kenya.¹⁵ However, few PCVE programmes are linked to evolving data on violent extremism trends. Participants noted the need for guidelines on making PCVE programmes more attuned to violent extremism trends and patterns.

The national conference participants suggested two broad analytical categories for understanding violent extremism. The macro-level focuses on structural drivers, push factors, and actors, helping

12 CHRIPS (Centre for Human Rights and Policy Studies). 2017. “Strengthening Community Policing in Kenya: Options and Recommendations.” Policy Brief No. 2. May.

13 World Bank (2020) Kenya Accountable Devolution Program. Conflict and Violence Risk Mitigation, Final Report.

14 Badurdeen, F. (2023). International and local NGOs addressing violent and hateful extremism in Kenya. *Conflict, Security & Development*, 23(5), 465-482, DOI: 10.1080/14678802.2023.2211034

15 <https://www.cve-kenya.org/observatory/attacks>

to appraise local and wider contexts of violent extremism. The micro-level examines the individual radicalisation process, which is varied and cannot be generalised. Researching trends is essential from a diagnostic perspective and helps understand future trends. Knowledge of the context and dynamics of radicalisation is crucial in overcoming assumptions and informing PCVE programming.¹⁶

Designing interventions also requires understanding individual radicalisation leading to violent extremism. For instance, there is a need to map out emerging trends in women's recruitment, including online radicalisation dynamics in the four counties. These factors should reflect the broader structural and governance mechanisms creating vulnerabilities for violent extremism.

7. Limited progress in contextualising women's role in Violent Extremism

The recruitment process for violent extremism can range from forced abductions to voluntary enlistment. Understanding this progression is crucial for governments and civil society actors to design effective prevention and intervention strategies tailored to different recruitment stages. Recruiting women into Al-Shabaab involves a complex interplay of social, economic, ideological, and security factors. Comprehensive strategies addressing gender inequality, empowering communities, disrupting recruitment networks, respecting human rights, and promoting gender-responsive approaches are necessary to address this issue.

There is still limited understanding of gendered dynamics in terror groups and how gender is operationalised within their organisation and structure. While there is growing literature on masculinity, there is limited knowledge about women's roles in terror groups. Most studies on women's participation in armed groups tend to define women in relation to men, focusing narrowly on traditional roles such as mothers, sisters, wives, or lovers of male members or leaders of these groups.

Al-Shabaab often leverages existing community social networks to recruit women in Kwale, Kilifi, Mombasa

and Lamu. Women recruiters, who may be former recruits or sympathisers, use their connections and understanding of local dynamics to identify and target vulnerable individuals. They effectively gain potential recruits' trust through shared experiences and empathetic understanding, manipulating social norms and familial obligations to coerce or persuade women to join the group.

Recruiters target marginalised, disenfranchised, or vulnerable women and girls facing difficult circumstances such as poverty, violence, social ostracisation due to relational issues (i.e. divorcees), or lack of opportunities. These individuals may be more susceptible to recruitment due to their desperate circumstances and search for belonging or purpose. While some recruitment may involve coercion or manipulation, it is vital to recognise that not all women join Al-Shabaab involuntarily. Some are motivated by ideological beliefs, desire for adventure, status or perceived grievances against the government or society.

Including gendered approaches in PCVE requires a comprehensive focus on women and girls as victims, perpetrators, facilitators, and supporters of terrorism. This includes understanding the differential impact of counterterrorism strategies on women and women's rights, and emphasising women as agents in preventing and countering terrorism and violent extremism.

8. Prioritising well-being and psychosocial support in PCVE programming

Victims and survivors of violent extremism in Lamu, Kilifi, Mombasa and Kwale often endure psychological trauma and emotional distress. Emerging evidence highlights the risks posed by non-ideological factors, such as the impact of trauma and mental on radicalisation and recruitment. Additionally, there is a significant stigma attached to individuals who have travelled to conflict zones, as well as their families and communities.

However, few interventions focus on mental health. To effectively prevent and counter violent extremism, a public health approach must be integrated into

¹⁶ Brett, J. (2023). Enhancing the quality of P/CVE programming through robust application of theory of change. *Conflict, Security & Development*, 23(5), 447-464, DOI: 10.1080/14678802.2023.2231897

programming across the four counties. Integrating mental health components into PCVE programming can enhance the effectiveness of whole-of-government and whole-of-society interventions by addressing underlying factors contributing to radicalisation. These programs can complement other preventive measures by promoting well-being and mental resilience.

Prioritising mental health in PCVE is crucial for several reasons. Individuals vulnerable to radicalisation and those affected by violent extremism often experience trauma. Providing support and therapy to address trauma helps individuals cope with their experiences and reduces their susceptibility to extremist ideologies. By addressing underlying mental health issues and providing coping mechanisms, individuals are better equipped to resist extremist narratives and recruitment efforts. For individuals who have disengaged from violent extremist groups, prioritising mental health is essential for successful reintegration into society. Mental health support can facilitate their rehabilitation, address issues that contributed to radicalisation and promote social inclusion. Participants noted that community-based organisations can significantly promote community resilience by supporting dialogue and engagement. However, they emphasised the need for trained mental health professionals to ensure that individuals receive the appropriate tools to manage their mental health and cope with traumatic events.

Conclusion

This policy brief has explored challenges and reflections on whole-of-government and whole-of-society programming for preventing and countering violent extremism interventions in Kwale, Kilifi, Mombasa, and Lamu counties. Key challenges include close community-security trust deficits, insufficient coordination among government and non-state actors, and funding constraints. Looking ahead, the brief has distilled several reflection points for PCVE programming such as trust-building measures, incorporating gender programming, addressing mental health sensitively, ensuring sustainability, and appropriate terminology framing. It emphasises the need for research, analysis, and evaluation to enable learning and adaptation.

Recommendations

National and County Governments should:

- a) Integrate PCVE modules into training programs, especially at the Kenya School of Government, across all ministries.
- b) Foster cross-sector collaboration through regular coordination meetings and joint planning sessions.
- c) Prioritize budget allocations for PCVE initiatives, advocating for increased funding within government budgets.
- d) Collaborate with communities and civil society in PCVE strategy implementation through inclusive decision-making.
- e) Support and learn from local initiatives addressing violence, leveraging community knowledge of security situations.
- f) Enhance cooperation through local peace committees, community policing, and *Nyumba Kumi* initiatives.
- g) Embed PCVE strategies across all ministries and integrate them into national development plans.
- h) Create mechanisms for active youth participation in PCVE decision-making, such as youth advisory boards.
- i) Fund youth development programs targeting underlying drivers of violent extremism, like unemployment and marginalization.
- j) Provide support for vulnerable individuals, especially women and girls, to prevent extremist recruitment.
- k) Collaborate with civil society organizations to leverage their expertise and networks in PCVE efforts.

Civil Society Actors should:

- a) Build capacity for effective PCVE engagement, including mentorship and technical assistance.
- b) Advocate for greater government engagement and public awareness in PCVE efforts.
- c) Empower youth to participate in PCVE decision-making and policy dialogues.
- d) Champion community-led initiatives addressing the root causes of violent extremism.
- e) Strengthen mechanisms to assess and ensure accountability of PCVE interventions.

- f) Foster collaboration among CSOs and with government agencies to amplify impact.
- g) Help at-risk individuals access services like psychosocial support and counseling.
- h) Implement programs to empower women and girls against extremist recruitment.
- d) Direct funding towards youth-led PCVE projects and initiatives.
- e) Support innovative PCVE approaches engaging youth through technology, arts, and sports.
- f) Allocate resources for meaningful civil society engagement in PCVE efforts.

Donors should:

- a) Prioritize funding for initiatives promoting inter-ministry collaboration in PCVE.
- b) Invest in capacity-building programs for officials and CSOs involved in PCVE.
- c) Provide adaptable, long-term funding for scalable PCVE interventions.
- g) Fund strategic litigation to defend civic space and promote security sector accountability.
- h) Develop guidelines for supporting diverse organizations, including joint funding mechanisms.
- i) Fund evaluations to enhance the evidence base for PCVE interventions and identify best practices.

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