

An Assessment of Community Based Organizations in Countering Violent Extremism in Isiolo County, Kenya

By

Eva Makandi Muriithi & Hannah M. Macharia

Kenyatta University, Kenya

Corresponding author email: makandimuriithi@gmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess Community Based Organizations in countering violent extremism in Kenya, with focus on Isiolo County. The research investigated Community Based Organizations engagement in countering violent extremism in Isiolo County, Kenya, regarded as one of the vulnerable counties in Kenya, suffering high levels of insecurity ranging from cattle rustling, banditry and other threats. The study was guided by three specific objectives: to examine the community-based organizations involved in countering violent extremism in Isiolo County; to establish the forms of violent extremism in Isiolo County, and to assess strategies used by community-based organizations to counter violent extremism. The literature review was done according to the research objectives. The study was guided by social identity theory and theory of change. In terms of methodology, the study used mixed method approach. Descriptive survey research design was adopted that targeted 53,217 populations from which a sample size of 100 was determined using a sampling formula. Multistage sampling was adopted to select respondents from each of the sub locations in the three sub counties under which a systematic random sampling approach was used. Purpose sampling was used to select participants for qualitative data. Data analysis involved qualitative and quantitative methods. SPSS Version 26 was used to analyze quantitative data while qualitative data was analyzed thematically. Quantitative data was presented in tables while qualitative data was presented using narratives and quotes. There were more formal than informal CBOs operating in Isiolo County CVE efforts. These CBOs were focused on recruitment and radicalization of youth into VE since there were no reported or known cases of violent attacks in the county. Building awareness and trust in their communities was the frequent strategy used by CBOs in Isiolo County to countering VE efforts. The research recommends that informal CBOs should be supported so as to achieve formal status so as to enjoy more participation the policy formulation processes with county and national governments. Secondly, it is recommended for a multi-faceted method to counter and prevent VE in Isiolo County due to the changing nature of youth radicalization and recruitment that has moved to online platforms.

Keywords: Kenya, Isiolo, community-based organisations, violent extremism, radicalization, recruitment

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Introduction

In the wake of global terrorism and more so September 11, 2001 violent extremism (VE) became a dominant issue in national and international debates. Despite this, there is lack of a comprehensive and inclusive definition of violent extremism. The United Nations (UN) defines violent extremism as actions and beliefs of individuals who use or are in support in using violence to attain political, religious, or ideological goals (UN, 2016). The Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) defines violent extremism as any ideology that goes against the values and principles that provide a foundation for a non-violent and peaceful orderly society by promoting terror, coercion, and violence as a means to realize and to change certain vision and beliefs of society (IGAD, 2018). Kruglanski et al. (2018) defines VE as a violence performed by non-state actors. This kind of violence is justified or inspired by social, religious, and political ideology. Equally, Amit, Barua, and Al-Kafy (2021) defines VE as any action that entails engaging, advocating, preparing or supporting ideologies that justifies violence to promote economic, political, and social aims.

State actors and related agencies have embraced the hard approach where security agencies are the primary actors in controlling and preventing VE. State approach have included introduction of legislation and policies to guide and coordinate responses to VE related activities (Guyo, 2021). The United States (U.S.) and United Kingdom (U.K.) intelligence agencies in Iraq reported using the military approach only with no soft power approaches contributed to an increase than decrease of Islamist terror groups and attack in the past decade (Morema, 2020).

On the other hand, nations have moved from the hard approach of countering and preventing VE to a softer approach. In Australia for example, soft power measures in the prevention of “home-grown” terrorism were adopted from 2003 implemented through initiatives founded on social harmony, promoting democratic values and the integration of those communities ‘suspected’ of extreme ideologies into the wider society (Harris-Hogan, 2022).

Kenya’s National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism (NSCVE) can be broadly classified under top-down and bottom-up approach (Isaack, 2019). The bottom-up approach is aimed among taking actions at the community level promoted by CBOs revolving around those considered susceptible of joining VE groups as active participants (Isaack, 2019). Conversely, the top-down approach is executed by state agencies and is more geared towards creating policy, reviewing policies and improving and creating strategic partnerships to make effective state performance and position on CVE (Isaack, 2019). Therefore, this research examined the bottom-top and soft approach of preventing and countering violent extremism in Isiolo County.

Statement of the Problem

CBO as agency in countering violent extremism are ignored or subsumed into being party of international organizations. This is because issues relating to violent extremism are viewed from security perspective of which CBOs are viewed as beneficiary of security

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approaches rather than primary actors. In most cases, CBOs are not invited in local networks or dialogue as stakeholders. This can be attributed to CBOs latent suspicion and perception that CBOs harbour undemocratic and hostile agendas. This remains despite the widespread acknowledgement of the potential roles non-state actors play in CVE This leading to underutilization of CBOs as agency actors in CVE.

In Isiolo County, community-based organizations have been at the heart of the CVE agenda. However, CBOs are facing challenges in implementing CVE interventions in their respective communities. There is a need to understand the CVE interventions of CBOs in the county in an effort to enhance the effectiveness of these in reducing incidence of violent extremism for youth at risk in these communities. In the reviewed literature, there is paucity of empirical evidence on CBOs interventions in Isiolo County which this study aims to focus on while also identifying coping strategies adopted to deal with challenges faced as stakeholders in CVE response.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was an assessment of community-based organizations interventions in countering violent extremism in Isiolo County, Kenya.

Research Objectives

The research objectives of the study were to:

- i. To establish the forms of violent extremism prevalent among youth in Isiolo County
- ii. To examine community-based organizations strategies for countering violent extremism among youth in Isiolo County
- iii. To identify community-based organisations challenges in countering violent extremism among youth in Isiolo County
- iv. To assess assistance that community-based organisations need to counter violent extremism in Isiolo County

Review of Related Literature

In Mali, Lorentzen (2021) conducted a study on women as new security actors CVE; using mixed methods design, the study adopted participant observations and semi-structured interviews with a sample size of 20 women and 11 men Secondary data was from scholarly literature and the Malian National Action Plan (NAP) on WPS and CVE. The study found that the NAP mentioned a need for engaging women in raising awareness in detecting radicalization under the pillar of prevention. It also identified teachers, prison staff, women, and youth associations needed training to identify disturbing behavior that leads to radicalization suggesting the need to promoting women engagement in security and peace mechanisms at the community and national levels.

In a study conducted in Sweden, Wimeliusa et al. (2020) assessed how CSOs perceived their function in building resilience and preventive work in the context of VE and radicalization. The study was based on 14 interviews, with 17 respondents representing CSOs and Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) at the personal level and in two different locations including nine women and eight men selected using snowball sampling methods. The study found that Muslim and Christian FBOs used religion as a resource as mosques and churches allowed individuals to connect and meet and contribute to social cohesion

In Nigeria, Nwangwu and Ezeibe (2019) interrogated the women-led CSOs role in CVE and adopted a mixed-method approach to show that engagement of these organizations in

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CVE had contributed to positive outcomes for attaining gender equality and inclusion in society and politics. These findings implied that women organization's participation in CVE can enhance positive outcomes for gender equality in society and politics. In a study conducted in Kenya, Crisman et al. (2020) looked into lessons from preventing violent extremism (PVE) using focus-group discussions (FGDs), interviews, participant observation among 80 respondents in Mombasa and Kwale, Isiolo, and informal settlements in Nairobi County. Out of the findings, community-based actors' critiqued donor-driven and state-led CVE techniques and perceived there was no option but to include this agenda. Specifically, community organizations felt forced to engage by relying on global donorship.

In a study conducted in Mozambique and Kenya, Mesok (2019) conducted a study on security and peace on women and prevention of violence implementing a mixed method research design where consultations and interviews were conducted with stakeholders in CVE in both nations. The study adopted desk-based research which showed that women organizations were susceptible to CVE industry influence as they faced greater challenges in funding that are escalated by donors' preference for providing funding for larger, international organizations. The countering terrorism financing (CTF) policies also reduced funding making it harder for women organizations to access funding and curtailing the work of these CSOs.

In the same study, Mesok (2019) found that huge financial resources that are present in CVE agenda implies that organizations with no qualifications are implementing and designing CVE programming, discrediting CVE work, posing harm to communities, and damage to reputations of domestic CBOs who enter into partnerships with bigger international organizations. These findings raise doubt to the formal or informal status of CBOs engaging in CVE which is also of concern to this study. The findings elaborated the threat of having externally-driven CVE agenda where respondents shared anxiety that violence conflict and prevention transformation will not be attained as the needs of community are second to a donor-driven agenda.

The existing evidence indicates a relationship of mistrust between CBOs engaged in CVE and state agencies and the working relationship between these entities has been of interest to researchers. Kiprono (2015) exploring alternative responses to CVE in Kenya adopting a qualitative research approach integrating a literature review and content analysis of narratives and descriptions. The study established that response by CBOs were not able to intervene alone against VE but also need backing and support from state actors and CSO. The study concluded governments are burdened to identify the beneficiary's needing emancipation from VE; a challenge that can be alleviated by partnering with CBOs.

In research that assessed community-based approaches to countering youth radicalization, Githigaro (2018) used qualitative research design and employed qualitative data collection methods to gather information from youth, grassroots community workers, civil society actors, and FBO leaders. The findings revealed that CBOs sought external partnerships for their economic empowerment programs but also sought to link youth with existing government economic empowerment funds. This strategy worked through youth sensitization on available Kenyan government funding and business opportunities. This study will go further and attempt to find out if all CBOs follow this approach of partnering with external agencies given that CBOs receive suspicion from state agencies while western influence may erode the pertinent local issues in regard to VE.

In the United States, Williams, Horgan, and Evans (2016) evaluated a multilayered community-based Muslim-led CVE intervention among a sample of 172 respondents from

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law enforcement, Muslim leaders, and community members from Los Angeles and Washington D.C. reached through interviews and FGDs. The findings' showed gatekeepers were reluctant to engage CVE service providers fearing likely repercussions; gatekeepers' unwillingness to engage was influenced by their fear that any participation would damage relationship with targeted audience. Moreover, gatekeepers' personal identification with targeted audience might lower willingness to intervene and their ability to recognize VE in the making.

In Jordan, Klingensmith (2019) examined the factors motivating VE and evaluated the CVE from the perceptions of local community participation collecting information using secondary and primary sources including six interviews on the CVE policy from different actors in VE to gain diverse perspectives while engaging existing published material on the topic. The findings revealed community participation projects such as interventions implemented via mosques, prisons, and schools are more effective in CVE in contrast to militarized methods.

In Canada, Macnair and Frank (2017) used a case study approach to examine a grassroots campaign named created and executed by students and consisted of assessing effectiveness of the intervention as a proactive CVE strategy by charting activities and components. The program involved continuous updates and engagement from social media platforms finding that the initiative was able to spread prosocial narrative to many people in Canada and globally. However, the aim of creating education, empowerment, respect, and humanization lacked empirical clarity; there was not attempt to describe or define how to validate and measure these concepts and there was no definite way to determine if there was any meaningful impact. Additionally, the program was also criticized for featuring, incorporating, and targeting persons who are not engaged in CVE and radicalization and less on communities that were at risk of VE.

In Kenya, Githigaro (2018) assessed community-based approaches contribution to countering youth radicalization adopting a qualitative research design. Oral interviews and FGDs were conducted with communities in Mombasa and Nairobi communities with CSOs, FBOs, youth leaders, policy actors, law enforcement, and community workers. The study found several issues facing CBOs in their efforts and this included securitization of the Muslim community, changing trends of recruitment into radicalization and extremism, and gendered patterns of radicalization. These issues means that CBOs need to have the adequate knowledge to effectively address these issues which was seldom possible from the interviews conducted with respondents.

In Sweden, assessed how CSOs perceived their function in building resilience and preventive work in the context of VE and radicalization. The study was based on 14 interviews, with 17 respondents representing CSOs and Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) at the personal level and in two different locations including nine women and eight men selected using snowball sampling methods. The findings indicated CSOs engagement in strengthening social support networks, increase community resources and building collective identity.

In the U.K., Briggs, Fieschi, and Lownsborough (2006) conducted a study on community-based approaches to counter-terrorism implementing the study in two parts: one involved desk research and the second part involves conducting FGDs and interviews in Birmingham, Leeds, Leicester, and London. The sample consisted of 200 people whom were residents of Muslim communities in these cities. The approaches consisted of improving leadership within Muslim community, tackling poverty, low discrimination and attainment,

and improving infrastructure, diverting youth from extremism, and engaging communities at the middle of counter-terrorist policing and interventions.

In the U.S., Weine et al. (2017) did a review of present approaches on preventing VE by providing a description of a community-based model and the role of mental health experts in the program which involved assessing individuals at risk of comprehensive threaten and behavioural evaluations and thereafter planning for continuous treatment and support, outreach, resource allocation, and education for communities. This community initiative would allow experts in mental health at grassroots community level to have significant roles in preventing VE through leadership and their professional practice.

In Croatia, Prisljan, Borovec, and Mraović (2020) examined role of communities and civil society CVE assessing potentials and capabilities of community organizations in CVE investigating best practices in partnerships as well as constraints hindering the creation of a whole of society method. The methodology consisted of a thorough literature review on community organization participation in a sample of 14 European countries. The results showed that there was a lack of constructive and cooperative interaction among state and civil society agencies in CVE, lack of public acceptance of interventions from community organizations, along with restrictive regulation and stereotypical regulation that developed into lower level of willingness of community and representatives to collaborate with law enforcement and state experts.

In a study done in Ireland, Kirby (2020) investigated the extent to which grassroots initiatives under the Communities in Transition (CIT) programme were able to attain community-based disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR). The findings indicated CBOs implemented strong grassroots peacebuilding, educational incentives, homework clubs, and opportunities to get recognized qualifications, and producing positive reenactment via culture and art, and community safety. These activities were grouped into diversionary methods, building community independence, and generational work interventions.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design that targeted 53,217 households in Isiolo County's three (3) sub counties Garbatulla (17,047), Isiolo (27,612), and Merti (8,558). probability sampling technique was adopted where all households had an equal chance of being represented into the sample size. Specifically, multi-stage sampling was found most appropriate to capture respondents randomly; it involves selecting samples that can be grouped into different geographical locations in relatively small sampling units from each site (Mulisa, 2022). The first phase comprises of big clusters are identified and framed, in this case, the three (3) sub counties were identified. The second phase involves selection of sampling units from the identified clusters (sub counties) using any of the probability sampling strategies, in this case, this involved selection of sub locations in Garba Tulla (4), Isiolo (3), and Merti (3). In each of these sub locations, unadjusted systematic random sampling was used to select households. Israel (2003) model for determining sample size that provides the option of precision levels states that taken sample size for $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 5\%$, $\pm 7\%$ and $\pm 10\%$ for Precision Levels where Confidence Level is 95% and $p = 0.05$. Therefore, using the target population of 53,217 and a precision level of $\pm 10\%$, the sample size was determined as 100 respondents as summarized in Table 1. A semi-structured questionnaire was administered to household working with CBOs and the key informant interview (KII)

guide was administered to community leaders, religious leaders, CBO representatives, ward administrators, and county administration representatives.

Table 1: Target population and sample size

Sub County	Sub Location	Population	Sample Size
Garbatulla	Garbatulla	6,334	12
	Kinna	4,014	8
	Sericho	6,699	13
	Central	13,782	26
Isiolo	Isiolo East	8,284	16
	Oldonyiro	4,287	8
	Ngaremara	1,259	2
Merti	Cherab	4,602	8
	Yamicha	2,573	5
	Merti	1,383	2
Total		53,217	100

Source: KNBS (2019)

Findings, Results and Discussion

4.4 Community based Organizations and Violent Extremism in Isiolo County

The first objective was to examine community-based organizations involved in countering violent extremism in Isiolo County. To achieve this objective, the characteristics of the CBO, CBO tenure in VE activities, and CBO partnerships in VE. The results revealed formal CBOs formed 53.8% of the responses while 46.2% indicated CBOs in Isiolo were informal as shown. In terms of their work experience, CBOs with 11-15 years accounted for 24.7%, those with more than 20 years of operation accounted for 20.4%, those with 5-10 years represented 14.0%, 15-20 years established CBOs represented 8.6%. In terms of their activities, 14.0% of respondents reported working in relief and peacebuilding respectively. Others include: environment (12.9%), while human rights and youth covered 11.8% respectively. The findings further show that CBOs operated in health (10.8%), education (9.7%), gender (8.6%) and others (6.5%). The CBOs worked in partnerships with private actors (31.2%), the county government (41.0%), and the national government (26.9%) as shown in Table 2.

Table 4.10: Community Based Organizations Partnerships

Actor Partnerships	Frequency	Percent
Partnership with private sector	29	31.2
Partnership with national government	25	26.9
Partnerships with county government	39	41.9
Total	93	100.0

Source: Field Data, 2023

4.5 Forms of Violent Extremism in Isiolo County

The second objective aimed to identify forms of violent extremism that existed in Isiolo County. Out of the findings, 12.0% of respondents answered violent extremism, 39.7% answered youth radicalization, and 48.3% answered youth recruitment. The respondents were

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unanimous in explaining that there were no cases of reported violent extremism. This finding is in line with previous research that has also found no evidence of actions of violent attacks in the county. For instance, Ramadhan (2020) explains that the county has not experienced large-scale attacks in recent times.

There has been an increase in radicalization of youth reported among respondents. Radicalization is defined as a phased or gradual process that adopts the ideological conditioning of persons so as to socialize them into VE and recruitment into terrorist campaigns and groups (County Government of Isiolo, 2018). There has been incidence of youth from Isiolo who have been involved in terrorist attack; the attack at Dusit2, there have been no other reported cases of violent attacks that involved used youth from the county.

There was also reported recruitment of youth into extremist ideology. Aga (2022) explains that Isiolo has not been a targeted from terrorist attacks, the county has several extremist groupings including Al Hijra, Al Shabaab, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) that recruit vulnerable youth starving for social and cultural belonging and economic opportunities. The known radicalizing agents for Al-Qaeda in Isiolo and the north-eastern region of Kenya is the Al-Shabaab.

4.6 Strategies CBOs use to counter violent extremism in Isiolo County

The third objective aimed at identifying strategies used by CBOs in violent extremism in Isiolo County. The findings show that 15.1% of respondents indicated their CBO was involved in building awareness and trust and providing psychosocial support was also an activity reported by 14.0% of respondents. Those that offered reintegration, rehabilitation, and engaging in public participation (advocacy) were represented at 10.8% in the sample. Those that offered counter-narratives activities were represented at 9.7%, while 8.6% indicated that they engaged in youth empowerment and disarmament activities as shown in Table 3.

Table 4.12: Strategies for countering VE in Isiolo County

CBO activities	Frequency	Percent
Public participation processes	10	10.8
Youth empowerment	8	8.6
Disarmament	8	8.6
Re-integration activities	10	10.8
Rehabilitation activities	10	10.8
Life skills training	11	11.8
Psychosocial support	13	14.0
Counter-narrative strategies	9	9.7
Building awareness and trust	14	15.1
Total	93	100.0

Source: Field Data, 2023

The findings support evidence from literature that CBOs have been on the frontline of creating and raising awareness on violent extremism in their communities. This awareness focuses on preventing radicalization and VE and the goal is for both representatives and professionals of organizations encounter individuals that have or are about to be radicalized;

to be able to identify the signs and adequately act to end its development to radicalization (Atamuradova & Zeiger, 2021).

Those youths in society that miss a connection with wider community often experience feelings of meaninglessness and displacement. This trauma disempowers these youth leading them to extremism so as to experience being valued, important, and feel respected. Membership to extremist groups provides the solidarity that disenfranchised youth are craving (Gereluk, 2023).

Psychosocial interventions are referred to as a tertiary strategy for fighting violent extremism. The psychosocial interventions are targeted towards individuals that have accepted extremist ideologies as their own or who are in interactions with extremist groups but may not be actively engaged in violent attacks (Mbadugha, 2022).

Narratives are the forefront of terrorism concerns and violent extremism as counter-narratives are offered as a means by which to implement P/CVE (Glazzard, 2017). Counter-narratives are messages that are designed to go against extremist propaganda to delegitimize and deconstruct narratives created and used by terror groups to radicalize and recruit people (Ahmed, 2021). Counter-narratives are important due to the large amount of extremist propaganda available in the public realm through media outlets and the Internet.

Public participation involves engaging the public in decisions by looking for citizens' view on decision making and shifting some authorities from government to citizens (Suphattanakul, 2018). However, there is evidence indicating that governments exclude youth in public affairs and this has contributed to resentment to authority. In Tunisia, youth shared that the government was not encouraging youth participation in policy making and this has consequently resulted in lack of trust between the state and citizens thereby vulnerable populations to extremist ideology and groups (Nash & Nesterova, 2017).

Badurdeen (2023) noted that military responses facilitated for focus and timely prevention of terror attacks, nevertheless, these are 'band-aid' responses and they do not deconstruct the existing threats or prevent unintended negative consequences such as stigmatizing specific communities and in the end creating contempt and distrust from these communities. Thus, improving the levels of trust is critical for community members that believe police are brutal, corrupt, and lead to community grief through arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial killings (Badurdeen, 2023).

Conclusion

The study concludes that CBOs engaging in violent extremism were formal and were focused their activities on peacebuilding efforts. It is this study's conclusion that CBOs were more involved in partnerships with the county administration due to the unique experience of Isiolo County with violent extremism that other counties may not be facing. The research concludes that there has been a reduction in cases of violent extremism attacks but youth radicalization and recruitment as a component of violent extremism still exist. It is the study's conclusion that youth recruitment has shifted into online spaces and therefore has become difficult to track the problem. Lastly, the research concludes that CBOs strategies to counter violent extremism in the county were targeted towards building awareness on youth violent extremism and trust among community members.

Recommendations

The research recommends that informal community-based organizations involved in violent extremism in Isiolo County should be supported so as to achieve formal status so as to

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enjoy more participation the policy formulation processes and also be included into forums with the county and national governments. The newly established PBO Authority is providing training and support to NGOs and this should be directed to CBOs in violent extremism so as to promote peace and security in Isiolo County.

The study recommends for a multi-faceted method to counter and prevent violent extremism in Isiolo County due to changing nature of youth radicalization and recruitment that has moved to online and digital spaces. There is need for campaign to reinforce true value of Islam from which most of the violent extremism emerges from; thus, there is a need for better understanding of Islam discourses and correct interpretation of its texts. This campaign should be through different channels including billboards, schools, social media, television, sport events, mosques, campuses, and radio.

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