

Drivers of Youth Radicalization into Violent Extremist Organisations in Isiolo County, Kenya

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Abstract

Isiolo County is a key economic node in the region, located as it does on the Lapsset corridor, which in turn links several road systems and promotes growth throughout the region. Cattle rustling, illicit guns, extremism, human and drug trafficking are all issues that threaten the safety of Isiolo because of its location. While there has been no major terror attack on Isiolo County soil, there has been an increase in terror-related activities as a result of some local youth becoming radicalized and joining violent extremist groups, threatening the safety of both Isiolo County and its neighbors. Youth radicalization is a major danger to the economic and social fabric of Isiolo County. It was speculated that the main causes of radicalization among teenagers in Isiolo County were neglectful/permissive parenting, drug and substance misuse, peer pressure, unemployment, marginalization, and poverty. Community policing strategies initiatives, fostering creation of jobs and entrepreneurship, developing an extensive rehabilitation and reintegration program for individuals who have been radicalized, empowering communities through education, building strong partnerships between communities and security agencies, and between parents and their children were among the interventions proposed with the goal of reducing radicalization. The study identified the drivers of youth radicalization in Isiolo County and strategies to prevent and counter youth radicalization in Isiolo County were proposed. The objective of this study was to examine the drivers of youth radicalization into Violent Extremist Organizations in Isiolo County, Kenya. Literature review included conducting an extensive review on the existing literature, reports, legal frameworks and previous research papers in line with the project title was done in line with the objective. The study adopted a mixed method research approach in collecting data. From the study various drivers of radicalization in Isiolo County were outlined. The study recommended youth empowerment, development of a comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration programs for radicalised individuals, inter-communal dialogue and promotion of cultural integration, encouraging civil responsibilities and reintroduction of mandatory community service training to help in combating youth radicalization in Isiolo County eventually streamlining the community security.

Key words: Kenya, Isiolo County, Radicalization, Youths, Drivers, Violent Extremist Organisation.

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1.0 Introduction

Radicalization into terrorist actions has emerged as a major problem for security agencies on a global scale. There has been a rise in the number of radicalized young in Europe, and second-generation Muslims are particularly at risk because they fall under the radar of intelligence agencies, as noted by Bizina and Grey (2014). Cultural and religious tension, political upheaval, and socioeconomic inequities have all been linked to radicalization in Africa (UNDP, 2023). This is because they provide ideal conditions for VEOs to become radicalized. Mozambique, Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Somalia, and the northern frontier of Kenya are only some of the arid and semi-arid regions of Africa that have been impacted hardest by radicalism. Terrorist assaults have placed a significant burden on Kenya. Isiolo County lies outside of Nairobi, the Coastal and the North Eastern regions, which are all thought to be radicalization zones, and are situated on the Northern frontier. It has a young population that must contend with extreme poverty, few job prospects, and rising drug misuse and addiction. The radicalization of young people in Isiolo County is exacerbated by their exposure to the county's many political, social, and economic problems.

This study sought to inform policy makers, community leaders, NGOs, law enforcement agencies, and other ecosystem enablers about the need for individualized intervention techniques by revealing the factors that lead young people in Isiolo County to become radicalized. The goal of this study was to add to the worldwide and domestic literature on the topic of juvenile radicalization and community safety.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Governments, security agencies, civil society, NGOs, community-based organizations, and the general public have all expressed growing concern over the rising number of cases of youth radicalization into violent extremist organizations and the violence that often follows. Deaths, injuries, losses of property, abuses of human rights, and widespread panic have all resulted from attacks by violent extremist groups, as is plain to see.

There have been problems with youth becoming radicalized in Isiolo County. There has been a rise in the number of situations where learners drop schools to join VEOs in the neighborhood. It's been reported that hundreds of learners have quit school to join the VEOs. The region faces increased poverty, abuse, neglect, criminality, and drug misuse as a result of the high school dropout rate.

Talent scouting and radicalization efforts by VEOs have focused on Isiolo County. It is important to note, however, that attacks have been carried out elsewhere besides Isiolo County by youths who have been successfully radicalized and recruited into the VEOs. It's unclear if this is related to the VEOs' supposedly universal policy of "don't poop where you eat." Solving the underlying issue is preferable to waiting for a solution to emerge.

The government has initiated several initiatives to combat violent extremism, such as the Anti-Terror Police Unit (ATPU), the Nyumba Kumi project, the promotion of youth education, and the incorporation of youth leaders into County leadership forums. The effort has paid off, with several young people stopped on their route to Somalia to join VEOs and the arrest of a suspect with bomb-making equipment and weaponry like rifles and grenades. There has been progress, but radicalization is still on the rise, therefore prompting the need to go further into the causes.

1.2 Objective

The objective of this study was to examine the drivers of youth radicalization into Violent Extremist Organizations in Isiolo County, Kenya.

2.0 Review of Related Literature

The drivers of youth radicalization entail the negative societal factors that exacerbate the vulnerability of an individual towards the path of radicalization as well as the factors that make the ideologies and lifestyle of CVE groups appealing to an individual. According to Kruglanski, Bélanger and Gunaratna (2019), needs, networks and narratives are the determinants and inspirations playing a key role in the process of youth radicalisation into violent extremist organisations.

2.1.1 Marginalisation and Inequality

Individuals and groups marginalized by society may become more susceptible to radical manipulations by VEOs as a result of the challenges, frustrations, and aggressions they experience as a result of marginalization. The unequal spread of capitalism and Western influence during the early stages of colonialism are blamed for the marginalization and inequality in Kenya. Central and Nyanza provinces, for example, were among the first to flourish after being exposed to the capitalist system and western ideas, as noted by Stiftung (2012). Northern and Eastern Provinces, as well as some areas of the latter, were slower to develop than more developed areas of the country. When Kenya gained its independence, it adopted a policy of resource allocation that prioritized investing in regions with the highest potential for return on investment. This approach meant that historically marginalized regions continued to be neglected. Because of this, already-disadvantaged communities were pushed even further to the margins.

UNDP (2023), which conducted a study on the causes of extremism in Africa, argues that citizens' marginalization—in which they receive few or no government services—along with their experiences of systemic inequality, state corruption, and repression make VEO groups more attractive. Youth are especially susceptible to radicalization by VEOs because of the powerlessness they feel as a result of marginalization and inequality. VEOs often take advantage of power voids by stoking resentment against the government by highlighting perceived injustices committed by the state.

2.1.2 High Rate of Youth Unemployment and Wide- spread Poverty

Unemployment and poverty are related economic and social problems. There is a correlation between poverty and unemployment because of the financial burden of looking for work. When

a person does not have any relatives with whom he might network professionally, his chances of finding a job decrease by more than 10% (British Council, 2017). The unemployment rate in Kenya is very high. According to the World Bank (2016), Kenya has a consistently growing labor force despite a very high youth unemployment rate. Mueller (2018) finds that youth unemployment and low income are major push factors of radicalization in his research of Al Shabaab and Political Violence in Kenya. The high unemployment rate makes young people more susceptible to radicalization.

Taylor (2020) and others have claimed that the occurrence of radicalization cases in both poor and rich states disproves any causal association between poverty and radicalization. Some educators in Isiolo County said that male students there were more likely to join the Al-Shabaab terrorist group rather than look for work because of the group's promise of economic success (Isiolo County Government, 2018).

2.1.3 Access to Education

Extreme susceptibility to radicalization is seen in those with low levels of education. Recruitment by Al-Shabaab in Somalia and Boko Haram in Nigeria has been studied recently, and the results suggest that the education profile of recruits is highly skewed toward low to no education, highlighting the extreme vulnerability of these populations to recruitment (UNDP, 2022). A lack of knowledge, says Kanol (2022), leads to the kind of ignorance that might fuel radicalization. Those who have completed their education are equipped with the knowledge, critical thinking skills, and compassion to resist extremist beliefs. Employment opportunities, particularly in the formal economy, are hampered for those who have not completed their formal schooling. When unemployment and other problems, like poverty, combine, young people become easy targets for radicalization.

The danger of radicalization is greatest, however, among the unemployed and underemployed with secondary or higher education who are unable to find work commensurate with their education level (UNDP, 2023) due to their lack of experience in the job market. Botha (2013) claims that certain terrorist organization leaders were college educated and capable of plotting sophisticated terrorist strikes. Al Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri had a master's degree in surgery, while ISIS's Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had a doctorate in Islamic theology. A person's level of education is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it protects them from falling for radicalizers' propaganda, but on the other, it can drive them to support terrorist groups if they can't find work.

2.1.4 State Intervention

Human rights breaches have been widely attributed to state interventions where government has used force to curb radicalization or violent extremism. In many cases, the CVE process has been made worse by security services that resort to the use of force, as this provides fodder for the conspiracy and propaganda spread by VE groups. With the 'we versus them' narrative bolstered, more young people become radicalized (UNDP, 2023) by VEOs. Security forces' disproportionate use of force against young people in their fight against Boko Haram has led to a rise in recruitment by the terrorist organization (Botha, Ewi, Salifu, and Abdile, 2017).

Human rights groups have previously accused Kenyan security forces of targeting neighborhoods with a high Muslim and Somali population for arbitrary arrest, disappearance,

and extrajudicial killing, while the security forces have denied these allegations and accused human rights groups of defending terror suspects (Hellsten, 2016). In addition to exacerbating preexisting concerns and spreading mistrust between the community and the security authorities, the indiscriminate use of force in CVE only has amplified youth vulnerability to radicalization.

2.1.5 Discrimination

International Human Rights Law guarantees everyone the right to be treated fairly regardless of their gender, race, color, religion, nationality, ethnicity, political beliefs, or socioeconomic status. The public's view of radicalization and violent extremism is influenced by factors such as a person's ethnicity and religion. Holla (2020) argues that an individual's susceptibility to the effects of discrimination and social exclusion might put them in a condition of rage and aggressiveness. Muslims in Kenya claim they face discrimination when trying to use their constitutional right to get National Identity Cards and other similar documents from the government. Even after obtaining National Identity Cards, those with Muslim names are subjected to extra scrutiny and often asked to provide other documentation to verify their citizenship.

As the number of terrorist bombs in Kenya rose, so did hostility and prejudice against the country's Muslim population. This is because to the common perception that they are terrorists who engage in suicide attacks (U.S. Department of State, 2013). In the wake of the grenade attack on St. Polycarp Church, in which a child was killed and nine others were injured, this was evident when Kenyan nationals attacked innocent Kenyan-Somalis. Al-Shabaab and other terrorist organizations have capitalized on these kinds of complaints to widen the gap between the government and the marginalized populations, making the latter more susceptible to radicalization.

2.1.6 Identity Crisis

Having a solid sense of identity as a part of the group is important for everyone. Because of their social isolation, some people feel compelled to find their place in the world. Trying to figure out who you are makes you more susceptible to radicalization (UNDP, 2023). The reason for this is that people are always on the lookout for a community to call home. Sikkens, Van San, Sieckelinck, and De Winter (2018) argue that due to the many changes that occur during adolescence, young people are especially susceptible to radicalization. This is a result of the bafflement that comes with coming of age. During this time, kids often withdraw from friends and family and lash out at the world around them because they feel they aren't being understood. Militant organizations use this as an opening to recruit impressionable young people. As a result of the Jihadist movement's success in creating and maintaining tight-knit communities, many of its members felt compelled to take up arms in defense of the "brotherhood" (De Bie, 2016). Terror organizations appeal to people because they fulfill a basic human need to be part of a community and because they provide a means of protecting one's identity from further assault.

2.1.7 Radicalized Leaders

Leaders have a pivotal role in society because of the impact they have on community growth and prosperity. Therefore, they tend to affect the decisions that people in the community make. It is common for VEOs to deploy a spiritual or communal leader with charisma to radicalize

followers. Mkutu et al. (2018) found a connection between the radicalization narratives preached by religious leaders in Kenya, such as Sheikh Abubakar Shariff, commonly known as Makaburi, and subsequent recruitment into violent extremist organizations (VEOs). Some of the radicalizing agents used by VEOs have been Sunday school teachers, high school teachers, and madrassa tutors. Institutions of higher learning both secular and private have adopted the practice.

2.1.8 Increased Dissemination of Radicalization Narrative

The radicalizing agent's intended message can be conveyed to the intended recipient through communication. Transmission of such data has occurred via a wide variety of channels. Meetings for radicalization in the Netherlands took place in private residences, garages, and even the back rooms of cyber cafés (De Bie, 2016). Videos were used to document the persecution, discrimination, and murder of Muslims all around the globe. This helped the group's members internalize the group's ideological convictions. The VEOs are able to spread their radical message to more people thanks to the widespread usage of social media. Those spreading this story are promoting jihad and undermining the government, according to research by Patterson (2015). Peer networks have been discovered to play an important role in radicalization, especially for young people who are voluntarily recruited by VEOs in digitally isolated locations (UNDP, 2023).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the relative deprivation theory to provide a theoretical context of the study.

2.2.1 Relative Deprivation Theory

According to Samuel Stouffer's 1949 relative deprivation theory, individuals experience resentment, indignation, and entitlement when they adopt the opinion that they or their group are disadvantaged in comparison to a referent. Humans, according to Gurr (1970), have frustration-aggression processes that are triggered by relative deprivation; therefore, when people are subjected to such relative deprivation for a lengthy period of time, their frustration may progress to rage, and they may ultimately turn to the commission of violence.

When an individual experiences relative deprivation, three psychological conditions must be met: (1) the individual makes cognitive comparisons to a referent; (2) the individual makes cognitive appraisals that they are disadvantaged; and (3) the individual perceives the advantages enjoyed by the referent as unfair and experiences negative emotions as a result. The hypothesis was applicable to our study since VEOs are a result of youth radicalization and the lack of certain societal variables.

The relative deprivation argument has been utilized by other academics to explain what draws people to join VEOs. Scholars such Ömer Taspınar in Taspınar (2009) have applied this idea to their investigation of radicalization's causes and countermeasures. The idea applied here because youth deprivation is a key element in the recruitment of VEOs.

3.0 Methodology

The study used a descriptive research design informed by a mixed methods approach since it is particularly well-suited to gathering data on individual opinions, values, and behaviors in relation

to social concerns. Because of the importance of the subject matter, volunteers were chosen using a systematic, random method.

Purposive sampling was used to identify key informants, and respondents were recruited by snowball sampling after those persons made interview suggestions based on their own experience with kids in Isiolo County and the provision of social services. The County Commissioner, Assistant County Commissioner, county police commander, sub county police commander, administrative leaders, Kenya Defense Forces personnel, National Intelligence Services personnel, representatives from non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations, and a representative from the National Counter Terrorism Centre were among the key informants.

A combination of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews in-person were used to compile this data. Due to the delicate nature of the topic under investigation, questionnaires were used to gather data from the kids in an environment where they felt safe disclosing their answers. The questionnaires, which were distributed by research assistants, had both open-ended and closed-ended items. We used semi-structured interviews with key informants to acquire in-depth information about the topic at hand, and we conducted these interviews face-to-face whenever possible. All-inclusive interview schedules allowed for in-depth investigation of any topic that arose throughout the course of the interviews.

When looking at the obtained data, the researchers employed the method of thematic analysis. Through a process of coding, cross-reading, and identifying central concerns that were in line with the study's aims, we were able to compile the replies into themes that we presented in paragraph form.

Participants provided informed consent, and their privacy and confidentiality were protected at all times. All participants were made aware of the study's goals and their ability to withdraw from the study at any time with no repercussions. The information gathered was used just for the research project and all participants' identities were concealed. Before collecting any data, the study made sure it had the proper ethical clearance from the proper authorities.

4.0 Data Presentation

Key informants included religious leaders, communal elders, parents of youths, the County Commissioner, the Assistant County Commissioner, the County Police Commander, the Sub County Police Commander, administrative leaders, members of the Kenya Defense Forces and the National Intelligence Service, as well as representatives from non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations in Isiolo County. The study surveyed 399 respondents aged 18 to 34 years old. In total, 399 people were included in the sample, and 255 of them responded. This corresponds to a response rate of 63.91%. According to the suggestions of Mugenda and Mugenda (2012), a response rate of 50% is sufficient for data analysis and reporting, a rate of 60% is good, and a rate of 70% or above is great. Since no mistakes were made in the data collection procedure, every piece of information was incorporated in the study.

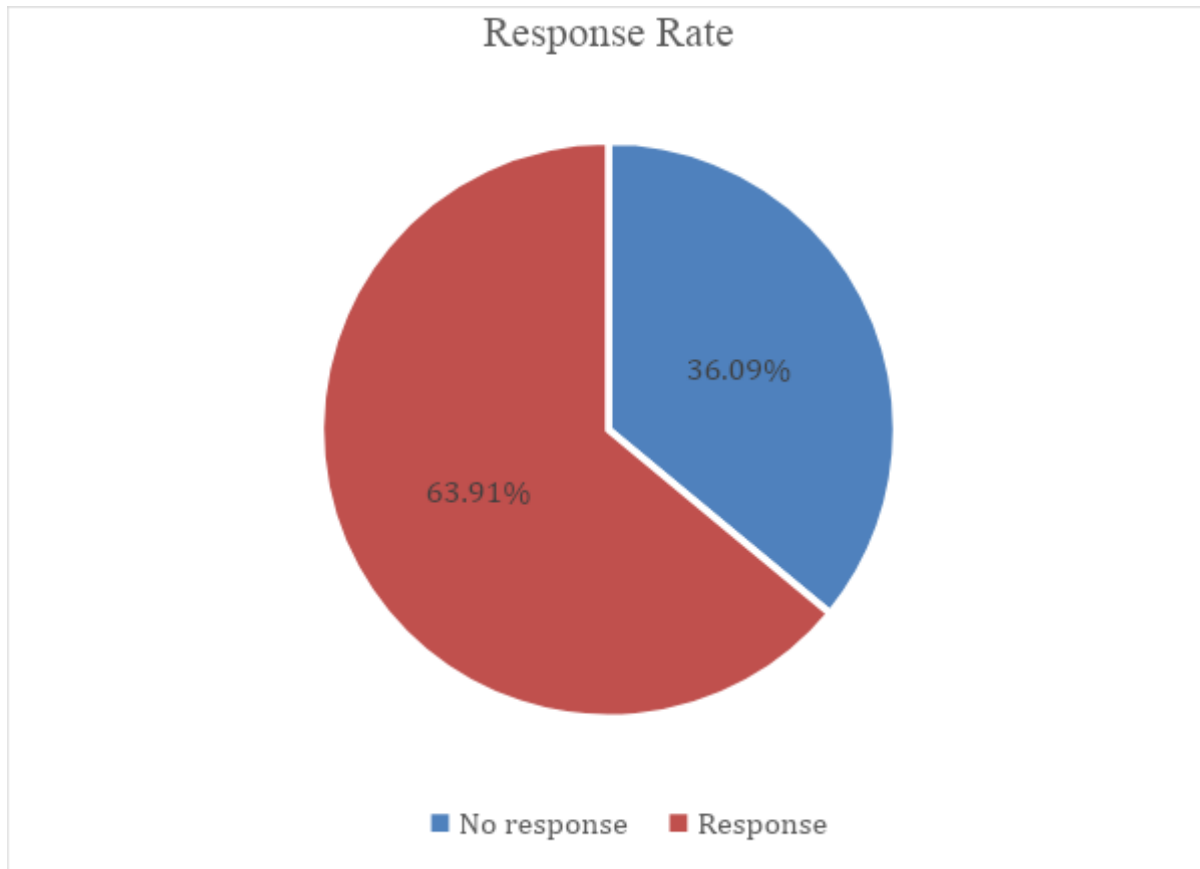


Figure 4.1: Response Rate

Source: Author, 2023

4.2 Discussion on Findings

95.3% of those polled said they were aware of the problem of radicalization among young people in Isiolo County. Most people are aware that young people are being radicalized into VEOs, but they are afraid to report it for fear of retaliation. Mzee Abdirahim (not his real name), a village elder in one of the Sub counties said that:

In the past experiences we have reported suspected radicalized candidates to authorities but the police turn to us as suspects. The villagers thus give this a blind eye for fear of victimization.

To remedy this, authorities must earn the public's trust by showing them that they will act responsibly on information provided by members of the community. Isiolo County's violent extremist radicals primarily aligned with Al-Shabaab, Al-Qaeda, and M16, three international terrorist organizations.

4.3 Factors Contributing to Youth radicalization in Isiolo County

In Isiolo County, many individuals pointed to parenting as a key contributor to radicalization. Some of the radicalization of the local youth has been attributed to the parents of those young

people. Some parents stifled their children's independence so much that the kids could no longer tell right from wrong. When their children went missing or began acting strangely, several parents failed to notify the proper authorities. The local government described an incident in which a high school senior was arrested for attempting to radicalize his fellow classmates with scripted radicalized materials. When the boy was handed to the authorities, his mother defended him by saying she would get naked if he wasn't released. The fight against radicalization and violent extremism is hampered by problems like these.

It was found that single parenting was widespread in Isiolo County. Key informants, particularly those working in the security sector, noted that the prevalence of single parenting affected community safety. Without a father role in their lives, children are more vulnerable to radicalization, which is a direct outcome of dads abandoning their responsibilities. An example is the Dusit D2 assault mastermind Salim Ali Gichunge, who was reared by a single father after his parents divorced.

Finding one's own sense of self was also mentioned as a driving force in Isiolo County. Some VEOs have provided a sense of community that the youth have been seeking. Some VEOs have urged young men to show their manliness by enlisting in the military and fighting with other guys. Again, this scenario highlights the problem of single parenting, as some of these young people have not had a positive male role model to protect them from falling in with the wrong crowd. It has been observed that joining a VEO is appealing to certain young men since it provides them with a male role model they can aspire to be like.

Individually and in tandem, the pursuit of work prospects was found to have a significant role in the radicalization process. Some young people have turned to VEOs for work because of the lack of traditional options available to them. Youth are especially vulnerable because of the compounding effects of poverty and unemployment. A young man who had been reared in poverty in Somalia by his mother alone and who had recently returned to the United States mentioned the need to find work in order to support his loved ones. He became so destitute that he joined the Al-Shabaab terrorist group in hopes of finding work, only to be deceived by recruiters and escape to safety once he arrived in Somalia.

It was found that young people's peers played a significant role in their radicalization journey. The rate of radicalization was accelerated by the impact of peers. Peer pressure to adopt extremist beliefs was a prevalent cause of radicalization, especially in educational settings. It was suggested that radicalization was taking place at some high schools. Due to the radicalization process taking place in the schools, several of the lads who were studying there but had already graduated from high school remained there for several weeks after graduating. After joining a terrorist organization, the impact of peers persisted even when influential peers were absent. Because their important peer had already joined the terrorist group, the youth left behind often felt that doing so was their best option. One of the respondents (Respondent 1) argued:

Ali (not his real name) was the best in our class, he scored good grades, was great at football and all the ladies wanted him. He went to join the terror groups, meaning it is a good place (Respondent 1)

The prevalence of drug usage and misuse has increased in Isiolo County. According to the responders, this has considerably exacerbated the problem of young people becoming radicalized

in Isiolo County. Kete is one substance that is often taken by young people in the area. Kete was characterized as a low-quality version of cocaine with a high intoxication time of up to 24 hours after ingestion, a low-price tag, and a high availability. Juma, 19 years (not his real name) said:

I was introduced to kete by my cousin when schools were closed during the covid period and soon became an addict. I could not go a day without getting my daily dose and could do anything just to get it even if it meant joining the terror groups (Respondent 2).

One of the responses from the Security sector (Respondent 3) noted that drug dens are the radicalization hotspots where youth talent-spotting and recruitment is done and indicated that:

As long as drug use and drug abuse is on the rise, we can expect rising radicalization cases.

Despite acknowledging the developmental measures that had been introduced by Governmental and Non-Governmental Organisations, the majority of the respondents felt that Isiolo was still marginalised, thus driving youths to join terror groups as a coping strategy. Rashid argued:

If I lived in a developed area such as Meru, my chances of being radicalised would be very low due to the numerous economic activities which I could engage in, unlike staying here where there are fewer economic activities (Respondent 4).

The study identified that some youth joined the VEOs due to the adventure associated with serving in the security organisations. Some of them had the passion to join the security organisations such as the Kenya Defence Forces and the Kenya Police. They had watched Hollywood movies of military action and wanted to be heroic as the military personnel were perceived to be and one Respondent (Respondent 8) noted: “I would like to fight for my Country just like Commando” (Respondent 8).

The television coverage of patriotic events was equally interesting. Some onlookers found it inspiring to see the security staff marching in the ceremonies, and many wished they could join in. Their story included attempted attempts to join the Kenya Defense Force and the Kenyan Police. Another way radicalizing agents convinced young people to join the VEOs was by promising them the right to march and fight with an AK-47 of their very own.

According to the research, radicalizing agents engaged in talent spotting for young radicalization and recruiting focused on high school and college dropouts who had left school for various reasons. The agents of radicalization would then convince the target that they have untapped potential and can achieve their full potential.

4.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, most of the respondents in Isiolo County were aware of youth radicalization into VEOs, but they were hesitant to report it out of fear of retaliation. Those that radicalized the residents of Isiolo County were connected to Al-Shabaab, Al-Qaeda, and M16. Many causes contribute to radicalization among Isiolo County's young people, including the influence of

peers, problematic parenting styles, drug and alcohol misuse, an identity crisis, a lack of economic possibilities, a sense of isolation, and a want for excitement and novelty. When existing religious, political, and cultural schisms are added to the mix, it creates a fertile ground for extremist beliefs to attract young people. Ineffective counter-radicalization activities are hampered by a lack of trust and restricted information exchange among the various stakeholders in the community. Many factors contribute to radicalization, and these elements interact with one another to shape an individual's level of deprivation, which in turn shapes their outlook on society and their susceptibility or resistance to radicalization.

4.5 Recommendations

The study made recommendations. First, the study suggests empowering youth through education, particularly by developing Technical and Vocational Education and Training Institutions to facilitate skill transfer and enhance economic sustainability. This approach aims to address unemployment challenges by creating employment opportunities. Second, the study recommends the development of comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration programs for individuals who have been radicalized. It suggests capacity building for Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) and Civil Society Organizations to respond rapidly to counter youth radicalization. Community-led initiatives focused on raising awareness about the dangers of radicalization, building trust, and fostering resilience are crucial components.

Third, to foster peace, unity, and understanding among different communities, the study suggests encouraging inter-communal dialogue and promoting cultural integration. Inclusive initiatives involving all communal stakeholders are recommended, with a focus on intelligence sharing, community policing, and surveillance to identify and apprehend radicalizing agents and radicalized individuals.

Fourth, the study proposes increasing awareness and encouraging civil responsibilities within the community and law enforcement agencies. This may involve empowering communal elders who would receive remunerations for liaising with administrative authorities, especially on sensitive matters. Communal elders would be responsible for communicating with local authorities and could be held accountable for not reporting suspicious activities. Additionally, the study recommends reintroducing mandatory community service training at the National Youth Service after secondary education to promote discipline, peaceful co-existence, patriotism, work ethics, and diverse cultural appreciation among youth, addressing concerns related to youth joining terror groups.

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