# Violent extremism and development: Witnessing a fundamental pivot

After years of strong resistance, the development sector has recently made a pivot to engage on the agenda of countering and preventing violent extremism. What has caused this development and what are the consequences for policy planning?

Development and security is oftentimes mentioned as a condition for sustainable peace, sometimes also in the triangle with justice. Clearly, the assumption is that one cannot exist without the other. Yet, when looking at the way various international actors are working together in programmes that specifically target the overlap between security and development, this proves to be more difficult. This is related to the differences in the principled way the problem is assessed either through a state security lens or a human security lens and how programmes are implemented by the two sectors. This is certainly the case for the topic of countering violent extremism.

For decades the policies addressing terrorist threats and violent extremism were dominated by the security sector. The security lens through which one looked at the problems mainly resulted in punitive and repressive counter terrorism (CT) policies and even military responses. Cooperation between the security sector and the development sector did not take place for two reasons. On the one hand 'root causes' were considered a taboo topic, since it was seen by some as a legitimisation of terrorism. On the other hand, the development sector

feared the securitisation of development aid and the 'corruption' of Official Development Assistance (ODA) funds for security issues.

In 2006, the UN Global Counterterrorism Strategy was adopted. This strategy introduced the 'softer' countering violent extremism (CVE) approach with more focus on 'conditions conducive to terrorism' and respect for human rights, in other words a comprehensive approach. Still, the term 'root causes' was not used. Although this approach propagated a whole-of-government approach and engagement strategies with civil society, the development sector was still not inclined to join forces with the security sector. In addition to the reasons mentioned above, the fact that the 'do no harm' principle did not play a key role in the overall implementation of the approach could well have been another reason for their reluctance. And indeed, despite the more comprehensive approach, CT and CVE policies still received criticism for their inability to mitigate the 'unintended negative consequences'. Examples are the civilian casualties as a result of targeted drone attacks against alleged terrorist offenders in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen. These 'unintended negative consequence' are therefore – in some cases – even considered to become a cause for radicalisation. Furthermore, in the public debate the possibility that socio-economic factors – one of the focus working areas of the development sector – played a role in radicalisation was completely dismissed.

However, since a couple of years there seems to be a change in attitude within the development sector vis-a-vis the issue of CVE. The presentation of the UN Secretary General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (PVE) on 24 December 2015 (A/70/674) has been one of the important milestones that have prepared this turnaround. The PVE plan of action points out that the security-based approach to countering violent extremism and terrorism of the last two decades has not put a stop to the threat posed by violent extremist groups. On the contrary, a new generation of terrorist groups has emerged. It therefore stresses that there is a need for comprehensive approaches combining security CT and systematic preventive policies to address the drivers of violent extremism that have created fertile grounds for the emergence of new terrorist groups. One could qualify this as a whole-of-society approach with a human security focus.

The PVE plan of action thus calls for a refocus of the priorities. Among other areas, it particularly underlines the importance of making sustainable development a core focus point. Reference is made to the adoption of the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), in the context of which Member States warned that "violent extremism threatens to reverse much of the development progress made in recent decades." Particularly SDG16, which aims to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, access to justice and effective, accountable and inclusive institutions, mentions the importance of these goals with respect to *preventing violence and combating terrorism and crime*. The UN Secretary-General furthermore points out that there is a need to mobilize resources including the ones that are "traditionally understood to be part of development efforts" in order to address drivers of violent extremism. In July 2016, the General Assembly passed a resolution (70/291) supporting the plan of the UN Secretary-General, and in which Member States and regional organisations are encouraged to develop their own PVE plans of action.

The reference made by the UN Secretary-General to the mobilisation of funds that would need to include development efforts, was not without consequence. Earlier that year (February 2016), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) had changed its position and no longer considered certain activities of PVE as falling within the category of CT measures, which would make them non-eligible for ODA. The argumentation for this fundamental change was that (violent extremist) violence was negatively affecting development assistance.

A month later (March 2016), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), subsequently, issued a comprehensive strategic framework entitled 'Preventing violent extremism through promoting inclusive development, tolerance and respect for diversity'. The strategy was the outcome of the UNDP's Global Meeting in Oslo in March 2016. In it, UNDP highlighted that many of the underlying factors of violent extremism are related to lack of good governance and shortcomings of development. The absence or weakness of early warning systems would further exacerbate this process. UNDP stressed the need to develop partnerships with key stakeholders and fully act in accordance with the 'do no harm' principle in order to reduce the risk of recruitment for violent extremism. Investments thus need to be made in the careful design of programmes to avoid 'getting it wrong'.

In the recent research report issued by UNDP in Africa, entitled 'Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment' (2017), the authors not only mapped out the most important underlying factors for radicalisation to violent extremism in Africa, but more importantly, individuals interviewed for the report highlighted which factor or incident had been the tipping point to turn from an unsatisfied citizen into a terrorist. In 71 % of the cases this was related to a 'government action' generating strong feelings of injustice. These actions include the killing of a family member or friend, or an arrest of a family member or friend. This finding further stresses the importance of the 'do no harm' principle.

Another important finding in the UNDP report was the rating of economic factors as drivers of recruitment. Particularly relative deprivation and underemployment played a key role. Although this underlying factor appears to be close to the working area of UNDP, it should be noted that this report specifies that it is not just mere poverty, but on occasion *perceived* poverty that plays a role. This would also be in line with the findings of a report issued by the Worldbank in 2017, entitled 'Pathways for Peace; Inclusive approaches to preventing violent conflicts'. The Worldbank found that particularly strong perceptions of exclusion and unfairness played a role as underlying factors for radicalisation. This would therefore, according to the Worldbank, merit a reorientation of policy choices and financial resources in development programmes as far as they prioritise preventing violent extremism. No longer should the focus be on the poorest of the poorest, but a shift should take place to (also) target those that have the strongest feelings of exclusion and unfairness.

While it can indeed be established that UNDP along with other development actors has made the pivot to cooperate more closely with the security sector and work on the terrain of violent extremism, it should also be mentioned that within the development sector one is still debating how to delimitate the working area. Underlying factors such as lack of good governance, corruption, violations of basic human rights, lack of socio-economic opportunities, lack of education, discrimination and marginalisation, lack of political participation and gender inequality to name a few, imply that all development work could qualify to be relevant for the prevention of violent extremism. So what are the policy implications for the development sector of this pivot?

In spring 2017, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF) organised the yearly UN-wide get-together in the Greentree Retreat, just outside New York. It brought together all representatives on directors or senior staff level of UN organs and agencies, and a handful of external international experts that work on counterterrorism (including myself). A great deal of the discussion was focussed on the question whether policies should be 'PVE specific' or could also be 'PVE relevant'. In the report 'Journey to Extremism in Africa', UNDP itself shed some light on the distinction between two, and even added a third category: 'PVE-conducive'. The difference between these three categories, according to UNDP, is as follows: PVE-specific policies seek to disrupt radicalisation and recruitment processes and reintegrate those who had previously joined violent extremist groups. PVE-relevant policies seek to address the structural drivers of violent extremism. And PVE-conducive policies seek to reduce the overall climate in which violent extremism flourishes.

Taking this distinction as a guide, key questions for the development sector are whether it is important to qualify certain parts of their work as PVE-specific, -relevant or -conducive? And if so, what the implication of such a qualification is? Should the sector limit its work to either one of these qualifications, and how should the interaction between development sector and the security sector take shape; as in, who takes the lead?

At a strategic UNDP regional hub meeting in November 2017 in Istanbul, it became clear that UNDP as the leading worldwide development organisation is still struggling with these questions itself. But I not just witnessed an organisation with a light identity crisis, but rather witnessed an organisation that finally had become aware of its own responsibility, and which acted in line with its own adagium of 'do no harm'. Conscious of the fact that it also needed to be accountable for the way ODA funds are being spent, UNDP therefore invests in solid evidence-based research to map vulnerabilities in societies, makes proper risk assessments of policy implications, and develops useful toolkits for the monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of its policies. These steps are explicitly taken as part of the UNDP's quest to find answers to the questions how best to contribute to preventing violent extremism; something the security sector in many cases so far unfortunately has failed to do.

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