

Open meeting of the Counter-Terrorism Committee

Building resilience of communities to prevent radicalization to terrorism

United Nations Headquarters, Trusteeship Council Chamber
Monday, 29 April 2024, 3.00 - 5.00 p.m. EDT

Segment II: Whole-of-society approaches to building community resilience

6 minutes speech

Excellencies, Distinguished Colleagues,

I am honoured to be here today as part of this panel on behalf of the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) to discuss preventing violent extremism through community resilience.

As we all know, recruitment into extremist groups is a complex process that exploits both objective grievances and personal vulnerabilities within communities. To effectively combat the allure of violence and effect change, we must adopt comprehensive, long-term peace-building approaches, fostering close-knit and cohesive communities.

UNICRI is committed to preventing violent extremism and has been invested in building communities' resilience over the last decade. Our project on *Countering Radicalization and Violent Extremism in the Sahel and Maghreb* regions, implemented from 2015 to 2020 and supported by the European Union, has been instrumental in providing evidence-based insights into effective resilience-building strategies.

Through this project, UNICRI has supported the implementation of an extensive range of initiatives - 83 in total - focusing on country-specific and regional efforts. These initiatives – carried out over five years in collaboration with 31 non-profit and civil society, media, women, and youth associations – have engaged over 22,000 individuals from communities directly impacted by or at risk of radicalisation. By working at the grassroots level, we contributed to addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by communities, thereby enhancing their resilience to violent extremism.

The research and implementation of these projects - through engagement with grassroots organisations and community members - have identified grievances that are predominantly structural in nature, and highly gendered. It became clear that choosing to join or support a violent extremist group is, in most cases, driven by opportunity rather than ideology. While the typology of grievances was consistent across countries, the analysis of underlying grievances and actors shows that a nuanced developmental, and not only a hard-security approach, is required.

Two key research findings, released after this project was completed in 2020, have paved the way for new initiatives.

The first one revolved around climate change, as 77% of respondents in Chad reported having been or knowing someone involved in a conflict related to access to agricultural areas or livestock farming. From our research findings, *dwindling access to natural resources due to climate change* and the

impact of climate change on conflict were dominant concerns for all local communities. Consequently, in 2021, UNICRI launched a research initiative to explore the links between climate change and violent extremism. The research investigated how climate change exacerbates existing tensions and fuels extremism, with a focus on community perceptions and experiences.

While the effects of climate change are not directly linked to the recruitment techniques of violent extremist groups, these effects have clearly been instrumentalised. The communities widely reported increased economic and survival pressures due to climate change on their main livelihood activities—farming, herding, and fishing. This has led to increased conflict and deadly violence within and between communities, causing a breakdown in social cohesion. In this context, according to our interviews, Boko Haram has linked these livelihood effects to their recruitment tactics. For example, an interviewee from Chad recounted how a member of Boko Haram compared the paltry daily profits from fishing with the lucrative foreign currency payments that the group offered to lure young people.

The second finding revealed the strong gendered approach of jihadist governance, highlighting the need for tailored prevention strategies that address the specific needs and aspirations of women, girls, men and boys. To elaborate on these findings, in 2022, with the support of the Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), UNICRI launched research in Mali, Mauritania and Niger to adapt prevention initiatives addressing the specific needs, aspirations, and demands of women from rural and marginalised areas to ensure the relevance of these policies to the on-ground realities.

Through this research, we sought to gather the views of local communities on service availability, gender roles, violence, and prevention of violent extremism. We found a direct correlation between the factors affecting resilience against violent extremism and the needs and demands of local communities, such as employment, food security, and protection. This correlation shows potential focus areas for prevention initiatives relevant to each context. It is also critical to design such prevention initiatives based on a strong understanding of context-specific norms and gender power relations. An example of how ignoring context-specific factors can render initiatives ineffective is highlighted in our research; when, for instance, while in Niger, women reported several restrictions to their participation in public activities, nearly 60% of civil society actors believe that women can independently decide to participate in such activities.

To conclude, in the past decade, by conducting research and listening to the voices of the most impacted individuals across different countries, UNICRI has identified how the needs of local communities, their priorities, grievances, restrictions, and access to services can inform recommendations on whom to target, where, and how - when it comes to interventions related to the prevention of violent extremism.

As exemplified by the initiatives outlined today, UNICRI remains committed to listening to local communities, conducting rigorous context and gender analyses, and tailoring our strategies to address context-specific factors. By working collaboratively with all stakeholders, we can build resilient communities that are better equipped to resist the lure of violent extremism and contribute to a more peaceful and secure world for all.

Thank you.