



## Background

USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (USAID/OTI) provides fast, flexible, short-term assistance targeted at key political transition and stabilization needs. As of 2017, more than half of USAID/OTI's country programs focus on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), including Bosnia, Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, Chad, Somalia, Libya, Syria, Lebanon, and Pakistan. Previous programs with CVE components include Kenya, Mali, Tunisia, and Afghanistan. These programs are designed to address the drivers of extremism and prevent the growth and expansion of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), al-Qaida, and their affiliates around the globe from West Africa to South Asia. OTI's CVE work is guided by adaptive management principles and provides the opportunity for country programs to respond quickly to changes in the operating environment.

As part of its action research methodology, USAID/OTI undertook a participatory process to develop a USAID/OTI Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) toolkit that collects lessons learned across USAID/OTI's various CVE approaches. The CVE toolkit began with a stocktaking process to compile "what we know" from existing experience & evaluations in an effort to answer not only "what works", but also whether the approaches used are effective and provide actionable guidance to other country programs.

With so much uncertainty about what actually works in CVE, it is even more important for CVE programs to articulate clear theories of change (TOCs) for how chosen programming approaches will affect the VE threat. The beliefs about how change will occur must be expressed so that intended outcomes and assumptions are clear and can be tested. The CVE toolkit focuses on six approaches frequently used in USAID/OTI CVE programs: counter and alternative narratives; reducing marginalization; youth engagement; improving government effectiveness; addressing economic drivers of extremism; supporting change agents and key influencers. The section on each approach lays out a TOC, what USAID/OTI programs have done to date, and what USAID/OTI has learned about the approach. The approaches discussed here are not exhaustive and should not be taken as proven. They do help highlight what we have learned as an office through what we are doing in our CVE work.

The toolkit is a learning tool for USAID/OTI and our implementing partners, and also is intended to better capture and share the learning with the broader community of practice and interested stakeholders within the interagency and external audiences.

## USAID/OTI Lessons Learned about CVE in General

CVE programs vary widely from one country to another and depend on context-specific analysis of sometimes hyper-local drivers, and beyond incorporating flexible and adaptive programming practices it can be difficult to extrapolate lessons across CVE programs. Good CVE programming requires analyzing local environments, triangulating information, questioning and testing assumptions, taking risks, being entrepreneurial and innovative, and adapting programming as learning evolves and the context changes. With these general principles in mind, the following highlights some overall lessons that may be more specific to CVE programming.

### *No Silver Bullets*

The number one lesson USAID/OTI has learned about CVE programming is that there is no one answer to countering violent extremism. Often, many approaches working together are needed to address a variety of extremism drivers specific to individual contexts. If you have seen one CVE program, you have seen one CVE program. Every context must be approached differently, with careful consideration for how to apply lessons from other programs.

### *Clustering, Layering & Sequencing*

Clustering, layering, and sequencing of interventions are important to achieving results in complex operating environments where drivers of extremism are often interrelated, overlapping, and unclear. Implementing a critical mass of activities with a specific population or in a specific geographic area, targeting multiple drivers (when possible within the program's manageable interest), with consideration for the timing of those interventions, is more likely to achieve desired effects. Also it is important to consider how clustering, layering, and sequencing work differently in different environments, such as urban and rural environments, where population size, density, and fluidity vary greatly.

For example, in Mali the USAID/OTI program focused CVE resources in a small geographic area and sequenced activities to begin with trust-building, followed by activities to integrate communities, and then finally the introduction of new ideas. Without the trust-building and community integration, introducing new ideas likely would have fallen flat or been rejected. The Niger program is taking a similar approach, noting that “entry activities” alone (often small infrastructure or community meetings) will not achieve the desired changes in attitudes or behaviors. Instead, it is necessary to consider how activities will progress and build on each other.

In Nigeria, the USAID/OTI program is attacking a complex problem-set from multiple angles by clustering activities around approaches that target various VE drivers (improving government responsiveness, repairing social fabric, addressing economic drivers of extremism, challenging violent extremist ideas, building a sense of community through radio, and supporting reintegration of ex-combatants and other VE affiliates). The intent is to see which approaches are more effective and to have a cumulative effect on the VE threat.

USAID/OTI's Tunisia CVE program also intentionally engaged the same local partners and utilized the same facilities repeatedly, which in the less populated interior was particularly successful at building awareness of these structures and opportunities. Individual activities will have extremely limited effects; instead “one thousand pins of light” all focused in one area or on one problem-set or beneficiary group are needed.

## **Sustained Engagement**

Related to clustering, layering, and sequencing is the principle that sustained engagement is critical to seeing changes in perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, and social networks. A one-day soccer tournament, two-week training, or single infrastructure repair is unlikely to result in significant or lasting change, especially where there is not intentional clustering, layering, and sequencing. USAID/OTI may need to reconsider the ideal length of certain CVE activities, which tend to intentionally be short-term to facilitate a rapid feedback loop. Longer activities may be necessary to cultivate regular interaction and lasting linkages. This may also include handing over CVE programming to longer term USAID Mission programming.

## **Importance of Social Bonds**

Finally, while drivers of extremism will always depend on the context and often are hyper-local (no silver bullets!), the role of social bonds on the path to radicalization and deradicalization is universally recognized. Radicalization is a social process — beliefs and worldviews are formed in communities; therefore, generic messages shouted into the void are less likely to resonate. Ideas are important but any CVE program that ignores the primary importance of relationships is unlikely to succeed. Many USAID/OTI programs, such as Pakistan, Tunisia, and Lebanon, cluster activities around building networks within and among communities, youth and others impacted by extremism and to focus on positive change. These networks become forces for influence that can and do compete with violent extremist groups efforts to radicalize people to violence.

## **CVE is Resource Intensive: Focus on Manageable Interests**

A CVE challenge for USAID/OTI is that addressing drivers requires sustained and focused resources, intensive management, and time to see a larger impact. For this reason, programs deciding whether or not to add CVE components need to set realistic expectations of what can be achieved, and consider whether or not they have the time and resources to effectively address the problem. It can be done and available resources (money, staff, and time) need to be thoughtfully considered. The CVE component of USAID/OTI's Kenya CVE program in Eastleigh was lauded for its seminal approach; however, a study of the program found the later expansion to the coastal regions was less effective because there was insufficient time to program there. The CVE components of the Tunisia and Afghanistan programs also began with limited time but were explicitly designed as “pilots” to catalyze change and share lessons with other USAID offices. The Mali program started its CVE component later in the program as well and chose to focus resources in a very limited geographic area in order to maximize effectiveness.

## **Plan Early on for What Comes Next**

It is important for programs to consider follow-on work (Mission programming, host government efforts, local partner efforts, etc.). The lessons here point to the importance of planning against time left in the program, resources, and the scope and scale of the CVE interventions. For example, USAID/OTI programs in Mali, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, intentionally worked with USAID Missions to “hand over” CVE programs or design follow-on programs as the circumstances pointed to follow-on Mission programming in those countries.





## Counter & Alternative Narratives: The Battle of Ideas

Challenging extremist groups' ideas and narratives by offering "counter" narratives is one common approach to addressing ideological drivers of VE. The term "counter narrative" is commonly used as a catch-all phrase to include a variety of strategies with different aims and tactics, namely: strategic communications, alternative narratives, and counter narratives. In short, it is about a "battle of ideas." The theory of change (TOC) for engaging in the battle of ideas is often expressed as similar to the following:

**TOC: If people are exposed to narratives that run counter to violent extremist ideas, then there will be a reduction in violent extremist activity, because (assumptions):**

- **Exposure to violent extremist narratives fosters agreement with violent extremist ideas (i.e. facilitates radicalization);**
- **Agreement with violent extremist ideas enables violent extremist behavior;**
- **Exposure to counter narratives fosters disagreement with violent extremist ideas; and**
- **Disagreement with violent extremist ideas reduces violent extremist behavior.**

### What We Have Learned About Counter & Alternative Narratives

#### *Good messaging campaign principles apply.*

When it comes to using the media for counter or alternative messaging campaigns, the lessons for countering extremist narratives are similar to the lessons for effective messaging campaigns more broadly:

- Understand the media environment.
- Design the campaign with local partners.
- Manage content and respond to community feedback.
- Get technical assistance along the way.

#### *The way users view and share media is social.*

An evaluation of the mobile peace messaging project in Kandahar, which distributed messages on Secure Digital (SD) cards via mobile phone repair kiosks, found that distribution of the media depended heavily on social networks. Who someone knows will determine which messages they receive, and from whom a message is received will influence how it is understood. It is impossible to separate the message from the social environment. The evaluation also found that because the Taliban is physically present in Afghanistan, radicalization and recruitment are more personal. When extremist groups are physically present in a country, they may not rely on media as much as, for example, ISIS recruitment in Europe.

#### *Countering narratives is not just about media.*

Tangible activities can be just as effective, if not more effective, at changing individuals' ideas and beliefs as the consumption of a message via the media. In Lebanon, activities that brought together people of different sects and nationalities gave individuals and communities first-hand experiences to contradict VE narratives about those sects and nationalities. In Mali, exchange programs between conservative areas and the capital exposed people to new ideas, and theater competitions allowing women and girls to travel challenged traditional beliefs about gender roles. From book clubs to public events to social gatherings, USAID/OTI has found that challenging ideas is about more than media messaging alone.

#### *Unifying a variety of activities under a common brand can amplify the effects of individual activities by enhancing visibility and providing a sense of belonging.*

In Karachi, several collaborative civil society initiatives sprouted from the umbrella of the USAID/OTI program and established their own organic brands. While each initiative tackled a different VE driver, all initiatives implemented multiple branded activities to amplify impact and create a rallying identity for stakeholders and beneficiaries. A 2015 evaluation found that this approach allowed the campaigns to combine calls to action with opportunities for action, and campaign messages and products with face-to-face interaction. The campaigns also gave people an identity and made them feel like they were part of something bigger than themselves — something an individual activity would not have been able to do on its own without the brand.



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

## Office of Transition Initiatives CVE Toolkit

# Reducing Marginalization: Increasing Inclusion & Expanding Social Networks

Exclusion from social, economic, and political power and/or opportunities is identified in many USAID/OTI programs as a driver of violent extremism. Thus, many programs try to build inclusive communities and reduce perceptions of marginalization among excluded groups. The theory of change (TOC) for reducing marginalization to counter violent extremism is along the lines of:

**TOC: If the political, social, and/or economic inclusion of marginalized communities is increased, then participation in violent extremism will be reduced, because (assumptions):**

- Exclusion and marginalization drive support for and/or involvement in violent extremism;
- It is possible to identify communities that are marginalized;
- Interventions exist that are effective at increasing inclusion (i.e. a sense of purpose, belonging, being heard, power); and
- Inclusion at the community level makes individuals in the community less vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremist organizations.

## What We Have Learned About Reducing Marginalization

### *Interaction between people from different groups can change attitudes and build connections...*

Activities in Afghanistan and Mali that brought people together from different communities and groups were successful in better integrating these groups and expanding their social networks.

### *...Especially when that interaction happens in multiple fora over long periods of time.*

One activity in Afghanistan that brought youth from madrassas and public schools together for media training was conducted over six weeks, and had more lasting effects on relationships between the groups than the joint theater workshop that was only four days long. Over the course of one year twenty-three activities in Mali were conducted to decrease isolation in one small region. These activities involved dialogues but also working together on projects for a common purpose, and recreational activities. One activity alone would have been unlikely to have the same effects.

### *Locally sourced, local language media can reduce perceptions of marginalization.*

The success of the Dandal Kura Kanuri-language radio program in North East Nigeria stems in large part from the fact that it gives voice to a traditionally marginalized community by airing stories about the places they live in their primary language. This approach gives people a sense of pride in their own community, and a sense that their community has a voice and is respected in the country as a whole.

### *Symbolism matters.*

In Afghanistan, holding a Premier League soccer tournament in Nangahar (rather than the capital, Kabul) sent a message that the province was still a part of Afghanistan, and able to conduct a major event in peace. In Tunisia, public activities in the interior of the country aimed to combat marginalization by showing the interior it was not forgotten. Celebrations of public holidays in Nigeria, involving parades with no security incidents, sent a message to struggling communities that peace had returned. Because marginalization is about perceptions, public activities with symbolic importance can instill pride that combats feelings of exclusion and discrimination.



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



## Youth Engagement

There are many reasons a CVE program may use youth engagement as a programming approach. Youth often make up the majority of participants in violent extremism, and adolescence can be a particularly vulnerable time in terms of the development of identity, purpose, and belonging. However, it is worth a reminder that youth are a target beneficiary population, not an outcome or result; therefore, CVE programs that choose to focus on engaging youth need to clearly articulate:

- **Why youth are an important population in the context (vis a vis identified drivers of extremism);**
- **Specific intended outcome(s) for engagement;**
- **Theory of change for each intended outcome; and**
- **The type of youth to be engaged**

This analysis will determine the type of engagement, which could range considerably depending on the factors above. Because there are a variety of possible outcomes, **there is no one theory of change (TOC) for youth engagement**, although often the engagement is intended to result in **a reduction in recruitment into violent extremist organizations**.

### What We Have Learned About Targeting

#### *Targeting at-risk youth is really hard.*

USAID/OTI's CVE programs in Kenya, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Nigeria all faced challenges in defining, identifying, and involving at-risk youth in activities, raising questions about the extent to which it is actually possible. Many factors make engaging at risk youth difficult. For one, programs need to specify what makes someone at risk to violent extremist influence or recruitment, which is incredibly difficult (if not impossible) to know, and can differ from community to community.

Many times, words like "at-risk" and "vulnerable" are left undefined, leaving staff and partners to come up with their own determinations. Even when there are clear criteria, engaging at risk youth requires extra effort to find and recruit individuals for activities, and a special expertise that not every local partner will have (think about sending someone from the suburbs into an inner city school). Not all youth engagement needs to target the at-risk exclusively, but if doing so is critical to the program's theory of change, this takes considerable thought and intentionality to implement. Program strategies should acknowledge the difficulty and describe their approach to targeting individuals to participate in program activities.

#### *Youth engagement for CVE outcomes need not focus exclusively on at-risk youth.*

Both the Tunisia and Lebanon programs focused on engaging youth leaders in addition to those deemed at-risk, and to integrate leaders with at-risk youth in joint activities. The development of youth leaders and positive role models in general can counteract the pull of extremist groups. Additionally, some research has shown that targeting individuals at-risk for VE can in fact further isolate them and exacerbate feelings of marginalization and discrimination. Building the capacity of youth leaders and bringing them together with at-risk youth can sidestep these dangers and also broaden social networks that can insulate youth from VE influences.

#### *The use of "hooks" can be effective to attract different kinds of youth.*

Programs should remember that youth think differently from adults, and often do not make rational decisions based on what will benefit them most in the future. Remember what it was like to be a teenager, and the types of activities you wanted to participate in, and why. This analysis will be context-specific, and will depend on the type of youth the program wants to attract. The Tunisia program was credited for supporting innovative art forms to reach a more diverse range of youth beyond those who were already civic-minded. The Nigeria sports program used soccer and volleyball to engage youth in what was essentially a mentorship and leadership development program. The "hook" can be arts, sports, skills training, career guidance workshops, etc. Over time, the platform and relationships established by the hook can be used to facilitate the "real" desired changes.

## What We Have Learned About Changing Attitudes & Behaviors

### *Sustained engagement is necessary to see lasting changes in perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, and social bonds.*

Some lessons learned about the ways to sustain engagement with youth include:

- **Implementing longer activities.** In many cases, this approach will require activities with longer timelines — perhaps multiple months rather than days or weeks. In Nigeria changes seen in youth participating in the sports program were credited in large part to the sustained exposure to new people and ideas over the course of a year.
- **Layering and sequencing.** Where a longer activity may be inappropriate, programs can conduct multiple activities with the same participants over long periods of time. The Tunisia program attempted to “layer” or “sequence” the same areas and participants with multiple short-term activities, and was particularly successful in this approach in the less populated interior of the country where activities were more visible and the operating environment less crowded. But layering and sequencing only work when engaging the same participants in a variety of activities.
- **Supporting physical spaces for engagement.** The Tunisia program focused specifically on working with youth centers in its areas of operation. Renovating centers and conducting activities at the centers engaged youth during the activities themselves and raised the profile of the centers as places where youth could gather and socialize beyond program activities.

### *Public activities can help to change community perceptions of youth.*

Both Tunisia and Lebanon implemented high-profile and public activities, such as large festivals and community service activities. These types of activities not only draw the attention of other youth, but also of adults, highlighting positive youth behavior and contributions to society. When youth are recognized for their efforts, this contributes to a sense of respect and pride that can create a reinforcing feedback loop. This can be an effective way to counter the feelings of humiliation and disrespect that can make youth vulnerable to violent extremism.

### *Activities conducted BY youth are as important as activities conducted FOR youth.*

Youth implementing their own activities may not be possible at the beginning of a program, but over time, youth can be challenged to come up with their own ideas and solutions to problems in their communities. Enabling youth to play a role in decision-making, engage with public officials, and lead community initiatives builds confidence, increasing a sense of empowerment and belonging. In Lebanon, youth who had participated in multiple activities over time started to feel a sense of responsibility to act as role models for other youth. This helped youth see themselves as active participants in society, rather than just beneficiaries.





**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

## Office of Transition Initiatives CVE Toolkit

### Improving Government Effectiveness

Many USAID/OTI programs identify frustrations with government as a driver of extremism. These frustrations are often connected to perceptions of marginalization or exclusion from political and economic power — feeling that the government is not adequately representing one's interests or responding to one's needs, especially relative to others' interests or needs. Sometimes, even in the absence of strong feelings of marginalization on the part of communities, state weakness and ineffectiveness are seen to give an opening to extremist groups, creating a vacuum whereby these groups are able to compete for control. To address these problems, USAID/OTI programs often try to help states better perform (civilian) governance functions, in order to extend their writ and improve community perceptions. The theory of change (TOC) for this programming approach is something along the lines of:

**TOC: If government is more effective in carrying out (civilian) governance functions, then there will be less opportunity for violent extremist groups to gain support and control, because (assumptions, will vary by program):**

- **Violent extremist groups use perceived grievances and frustrations with the government to portray themselves as an alternative and garner support;**
- **Violent extremist groups take advantage of state weakness and ineffectiveness to assert control, even in the absence of strong community support;**
- **The process of effective governance involves community engagement, which is critical to improving perceptions of government; and**
- **The government is able to provide security to communities, or if it cannot, improved effectiveness in civilian governance functions is sufficient to improve community perceptions and establish state control.**

### What We Have Learned About Improving Perceptions of Government

#### ***Government engagement in the process of implementing activities is critical.***

Many programs have found that government demonstration of effort to engage with and be responsive to citizens can go a long way to improve perceptions, even when service delivery was not up to the highest standard. Communities will have more patience for a government that is seen to be trying. In Syria, communities have shown to value local and provincial council presence inside Syria and efforts to engage, even when resources are lacking. In Pakistan and Afghanistan, participatory processes in government projects have been critical to improving perceptions of government. In Nigeria, a participant in a Democracy Day Summit, once given the opportunity to ask and receive a response, was satisfied with the government's explanation for why it would not improve a road in his community. The quality of government services is not irrelevant, but government effort and engagement can cover a multitude of sins.

#### ***Small infrastructure repairs may have a bigger impact on perceptions of government in rural areas than urban areas — scale matters.***

The Afghanistan program found that small infrastructure projects in large cities — where service delivery levels varied from area to area — were less visible and did not connect people to government on a large enough scale to effectively change perceptions of government. Activities in small rural areas, however, where entire communities depended on small infrastructure such as canal and road networks, were more visible, had more direct impact on the community, and were more likely to have an effect on their confidence in the government.

#### ***For projects to increase confidence in government, communities must attribute them to the government.***

This does not always mean communities must think the government fully funded the activity, but branding is important and communities must be able to attribute the activity to the government in some way. The Afghanistan program found that, by and large, communities knew the international community was funding projects, but government presence at events could still demonstrate investment of time and resources for the community. Public outreach and strategic communications can also raise the visibility of government involvement.

## ***Gains in perceptions of government can be lost if program activities raise expectations the government is unable (or unwilling) to meet.***

Research by both the Afghanistan and Pakistan programs highlight the danger that activities may have raised expectations among the community that governments ultimately are notable to meet. When programs encourage people to go to the government with their problems and concerns, the government must have some capacity to respond; otherwise, communities may become more angry and frustrated. A Pakistan case study also found that modeling good practices (such as transparency, fairness, and community engagement) was not enough to overcome cultural barriers, personal motivations, and institutional inertia preventing the government from adopting these practices.

## **What We Have Learned About the Relationship between Government Effectiveness and Extremism**

### ***Confidence in government may not always be correlated with less support for extremism.***

While government effectiveness or lack of confidence in government may be assessed as a driver of extremism, often the relationship between government and extremism may not function in the way first assumed. For example, a USAID/OTI Nigeria assessment on activities to support government responsiveness showed that perceptions of confidence in government correlated with more support for extremism. It is likely context-specific, and points to the importance of thorough analysis of drivers and iterative and flexible programming to adapt as more is learned about drivers over time. It also requires analysis of timing around when to engage government actors as sometimes they are not seen as trustworthy.

### ***The government must be able to provide security in order for improvements in the provision of civilian governance functions to be effective in combating extremists.***

Improving government effectiveness can reduce grievances that drive support for extremism, and limit the ability of VE groups to portray themselves as viable alternatives to gain recruits. However, if the government cannot provide security for its citizens and does not have the capacity to ward off extremist groups with force, confidence in government alone cannot prevent extremist takeover of an area. This was evident in Raqqa in Syria, when ISIS moved in despite the lack of popular support and the relative effectiveness of the Raqqa Provincial Council. It was also the case in Nigeria, where an ineffective military response allowed Boko Haram to take over and destroy large parts of the North East, all while popular support for the group declined. It is important to note that security that violates basic human rights is often a driver of extremism. Security must be implemented in a way that also does not violate the rights of the citizens and communities it is intended to protect.

### ***Improvements to government effectiveness happen locally; support for extremism can be transnational.***

Extremist groups do not always rely on popular support from the areas they attack and control. Sometimes they do, but support and recruits can also come from other sources. Therefore, improving government effectiveness in a particular area does not necessarily translate to reducing the VE threat in that particular area, even if it reduces frustrations with government in that area. Programming seeking to reduce frustrations with government that drive extremism should focus on the areas from which extremist groups are drawing their support, not (necessarily) the areas most affected by extremist violence.

### ***Supporting the government to provide basic services may be effective in areas where extremist groups threaten to use provision of services to gain support.***

There is evidence that in several places in Syria communities have resisted extremist group encroachment into service delivery because those services are already being provided by moderate opposition actors in those areas. This indicates that where there is competition for control over civilian governance, effective government performance can strengthen community resolve against extremists. Conversely, in Nigeria, Boko Haram (before the group splintered and one faction aligned with ISIS) never attempted to govern any of the areas it controlled; it competed with the state by force, but was never a viable governance alternative. Though only speculation, this could be a reason increased confidence in government did not have an influence on support for extremism. Boko Haram never used service delivery as a means to gain support so presumably service delivery improvements by the government could leave support for Boko Haram unchanged.





## Addressing Economic Drivers of Extremism

Some USAID/OTI programs identify frustrations with a lack of economic opportunity and relative economic deprivation as drivers of extremism. While USAID/OTI cannot affect macro-level economic conditions like poverty and unemployment, programs sometimes choose to implement short-term interventions to boost individual and community economic conditions in order to reduce frustration and desperation that may drive people to support or join extremist groups. The theory of change (TOC) for these types of interventions is something like:

**TOC: If individual and/or community frustrations with economic conditions are reduced, they will be less likely to join or support violent extremist groups out of desperation, because (assumptions):**

- Frustration with a lack of economic opportunity and/or relative economic deprivation is driving support for violent extremism;
- Violent extremist groups are using financial incentives to entice recruits;
- Improved economic conditions at the individual and/or community level will reduce frustration and/or limit the attractiveness of VE groups' financial incentives; and
- It is possible for donor interventions to improve economic conditions in the short-term.

### What We Have Learned About Improving Economic Conditions

*It is extremely difficult to implement vocational training activities that actually improve economic conditions.*

Study after study support this conclusion, and Lebanon reaffirms this finding. Vocational training activities that are not clearly linked to actual jobs are unlikely to lead to steady employment.

#### *Addressing lack of skills is not the only way to improve livelihoods.*

Often programs trying to address economic conditions default to vocational training, but this approach assumes a lack of skills is the reason for unemployment or poverty. Lebanon, Nigeria, and Niger show there are many other ways to tackle the problem of poor economic conditions. Improvements to market infrastructure and support for agricultural livelihoods through the provision of farming equipment, tools, and seeds potentially has a broader impact on community economic conditions than vocational training programs conducted for 20 individuals at a time.

#### *Vocational training activities can be a “hook” to achieve CVE outcomes unrelated to economic conditions.*

The Lebanon study showed that vocational trainings increased participants' self-esteem, sense of belonging, and community engagement. Initial activity-level reviews of apprenticeship programs in Nigeria showed that participants had an increased sense of purpose and hope for the future. Niger similarly has found that skills training provides opportunities for youth to engage constructively and demonstrate a value-added to the community. These activities do not address economic drivers of extremism, but they have other outcomes that could be relevant to CVE.

#### *Short-term employment (cash-for-work) activities can also be used to achieve CVE outcomes unrelated to economic conditions.*

Work is about more than money. In addition to a source of livelihood, work can provide a sense of purpose, self-esteem, value, identity, and belonging. In Niger, short-term employment opportunities provide a constructive outlet for workers and demonstrate a positive contribution to the community. The Mali program implemented several short-term employment activities to bring people from different groups together to work toward a common goal in order to increase integration between the groups. The evidence that short-term

employment activities can improve economic conditions is weak, but these interventions can be implemented to achieve other outcomes relevant to CVE.

## What We Have Learned About the Relationship between Economic Conditions and Extremism

### *Sometimes frustration at a lack of economic opportunity really does drive extremism.*

This does not mean people join extremist groups because they are poor; but relative deprivation can contribute to a sense of injustice and marginalization, and desperation can push people to consider options they would not have otherwise considered. A survey in Nigeria found that individuals who are unemployed were more likely to support extremist violence than their employed peers (16% of unemployed vs. 7% of employed). The poorest individuals — those who do not have enough money to buy basic goods — were also more likely to have a positive view of extremist groups. Of course, this always depends on the context and cannot be assumed, but should also not be dismissed out of hand.



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

## Office of Transition Initiatives CVE Toolkit

# Supporting Change Agents & Key Influencers: Working with Moderate Actors

While each of the approaches discussed has focused on addressing a driver of extremism — a problem of some sort that enables or leads people to join or support extremist organizations — some programs choose to focus instead (or in addition to) on supporting change agents and key influencers. This approach is less about trying to solve problems and address inadequacies (focusing on deficits) and more about amplifying and bolstering what is good in a society (focusing on that which is creative and generative). This sometimes is connected to improving government effectiveness, but can be broader and is not related in the same way to a specific grievance (i.e. frustration with government). The theory of change (TOC) for this programming approach is something like:

**TOC: If change agents and key influencers are strengthened and/or moderate space is reclaimed or expanded, violent extremist groups will have less opportunity to operate and gain support, because (assumptions):**

- Change agents, key influencers, and moderate space provide greater social, cultural, and economic benefits than extremist space;
- There is strength in numbers and building networks between change agents and key influencers can make communities more resilient to extremism;
- There is a finite amount of “space” in communities and if change agents and key influencers are bolstered to take up more of that space, extremist groups will automatically take up less; and
- Stronger change agents and key influencers will implement more CVE initiatives on their own.

## What We Have Learned About Supporting Change Agents and Key Influencers

*Working with the same partners multiple times can increase their legitimacy in the community.*

The Lebanon program's sustained support of local partners over time was shown to increase those partners' credibility, with communities beginning to look to them as positive community actors capable of addressing community problems. When partners are able to mobilize resources to visibly benefit communities, legitimacy and influence is built.

*Networking change agents and key influencers amplifies the impact of individual organizations.*

Lebanon, Pakistan, and Niger all worked to build networks between positive actors, which provides a sense of strength in numbers and can embolden them to speak out against extremism.

## What We Have Learned About the Relationship between Change Agents, Key Influencers, and Extremism

*Once moderate space is created, communities will be more likely to maintain it, even in the face of extremist threats.*

In Lebanon, a cluster review found many cases of communities demonstrating ownership to protect the space they had created. For example, after rehabilitating a market formerly controlled by extremists, shop owners resisted co-option attempts by political leaders. In another area, when a local partner organized a public holiday celebration in a market that had been rehabilitated, the event took place and was well attended despite threats from extremist groups.



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE