BUILDING RESILIENCE TO RADICALISATION INQUIRY

MERCY CORPS WRITTEN EVIDENCE TO THE BRITISH COUNCIL ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP

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Introduction

1. Mercy Corps is a global aid organisation working in more than 40 countries around the world responding to conflict, crisis and fragility. From Syria to South Sudan, Iraq, to Afghanistan we work with some of the 1.5 billion people whose lives are currently riven by conflict and violence. We work in some of the world's toughest places, addressing both the devastating impact and the root causes of conflict and fragility.

2. Mercy Corps generates and applies new evidence on the drivers and effects of political violence, including what drives young people to support or participate in violent extremism. Since the late 1990s, we have implemented over 100 peacebuilding programmes in over 30 countries and regions. Since 2014, we have supported more than 12,000 adolescents in Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon with resources to develop life skills, improve economic opportunities and build peaceful refugee and local host communities.

3. We welcome this initiative of the British Council to take stock of current thinking and programming and welcome the opportunity to provide oral and written evidence to this timely inquiry.

4. This submission draws on Mercy Corps' research into the key drivers of support for extremist groups and programmes designed to address those drivers.

5. Our submission addresses the majority of the questions posed in the Committee's inquiry organised under eight headings.

What are the causes or factors that increase the risk of radicalisation or recruitment?

6. Mercy Corps has produced a series of studies in countries where we work centred on the relationship between youth and violence. From our research we understand what fuels grievances that lead to multiple forms of violence, including violent extremism, but we do not yet fully understand the process of radicalisation. Findings include:

    a. The principal drivers of political violence are rooted in experiences of injustice: perceptions of discrimination, inequality, corruption, and abuse by governments and their security forces. As our 2015 Youth and Consequences report found, injustice is among the most consistent precursors to violent behaviour. No matter whether it is

experienced directly, through intergenerational histories, or through perceived "collective shaming", injustice brews hopelessness, disenfranchisement and marginalisation.

b. The way armed groups package and offer the revolutionary nature of radical Islam and violence appeals to disillusioned people seeking recognition, a sense of meaning, or the opportunity to right an injustice or lack of governance. However, ideology and religion are themselves overplayed as drivers of violent extremism. Radicalisation is not necessary for joining or supporting a violent extremist (VE) group. In fact, many former fighters we have interviewed said they were not especially religious before joining a VE group.

c. At an individual level, unmet expectations may play prominently in decisions about whether or not to join an extremist organisation. For many youth especially, conceptions of gender roles, respect, and status are significant factors. From Jordan to Jihad (2015) examined the motivations of Jordanian foreign fighters. We found they were socially, politically and economically marginalised and had little hope for the future. Narratives of joining the war in Syria to protect Sunni women and children resonated with them and gave their lives greater meaning. In a different context, our study of former Boko Haram fighters found that many young men who supported or joined Boko Haram had struggled to meet their society's expectations of adulthood and manhood. Inequality and discontent with government over poor service provision and a lack of access to political power had contributed to their participation. In Boko Haram, they found a chance to overcome embarrassment and frustration. Our follow-up study Gifts and Graft (2016) found that Boko Haram's financial support increased recruitment and capitalised on frustrations over inadequacies in government economic programmes.

d. Our research Why Youth Fight (2013) describes how exposure to violence, including state violence, is the strongest predictor of future participation in violence. In Afghanistan, we found that exposure to violence perpetrated by government forces was the strongest predictor of support for the Taliban.

e. We see no demographic profile of participation in violent extremism. From former Syrian rebels, to the Taliban and al-Shabab, members of groups we have spoken with come from diverse backgrounds. Some had jobs, and others did not. Some attended secular school, others Islamic school. Many are engineers and doctors.

What reduces political violence and builds resilience to violent extremism?

7. We are currently testing what works in numerous peacebuilding programmes worldwide. Across the board, we see greater impact where programmes are multi-sectoral, for example, integrating psychosocial work with community development projects or market-driven livelihoods programming. Our latest evidence from Somaliland, for example describes the benefit of combining quality education and civic engagement activities in order to reduce youth's propensity towards violence. We also advocate for larger scale investments in peacebuilding earlier in humanitarian responses to prevent political violence and in turn get ahead of the violent extremism problem. From current practice and evidence, key recommendations include:

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8. Inequity or lack of opportunity, in terms of jobs and education, may well be a driving factor for some young people and are essential for development. However, our research strongly suggests that providing jobs or education alone, without addressing governance and opening opportunities for meaningful civic engagement is insufficient for reducing political violence in many settings. Through our programmes and research, we have gathered convincing evidence that combined approaches (such as [education and civic engagement](#)) can successfully reduce political violence.

9. Address grievances of political marginalisation by promoting positive and responsive state-citizen relationships

    a. Our research [Investing in Iraq's Peace](#) (2016) identified marginalisation from government decision-making processes as a key grievance contributing to Sunni Arab support for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Findings demonstrated that when marginalised groups believe the government will be more responsive, accountable and fair, support for armed violence and the sectarian groups perpetuating it decreases.

    b. Strengthening government responsiveness, particularly around service provision, reduces one of the grievances that violent extremism (VE) groups manipulate to their advantage. In practice, this means creating opportunities and strengthening processes for government and communities to work together to meet their day-to-day needs; from service provision, to participation in local development planning.

10. Reduce the incentives for joining a VE group

    a. Groups use a variety of incentives in recruitment: From protecting their communities and fighting the injustices they witness, to providing unmet services such as education, security or financial services, or the offer of joining a community and feeling a sense of belonging. Mercy Corps is seeing some success by building alternatives. The EU-funded *Youth Advancement for Peace and Productive Tomorrow* programme in Jordan provides psychosocial, life skills, and non-violent civic participation activities to 6,000 youth to help them counter radical agendas.

11. Identify key influencers and disseminate constructive alternate narratives

    c. Mercy Corps' programming in Jordan focuses on social networks, identifying the actors who exert positive influences on marginalised youth. [Mercy Corps Jordan's research](#) identified mothers as key actors who exert a powerful influence on youth. Their status within Islam can be a counterweight to the gendered narratives that compel some men to defend the honour of fellow Sunnis. Also, some Jordanian foreign fighters returned home from Syria in part due to their mother's pressure.

    d. Recruitment to VE groups is a social enterprise. In our research from Jordan, almost no one decided by themselves to go to Syria. Instead, peer influences, family connections in Syria, a desire for social status and/or the example of a respected family member or friend were central to the decision. Given recruitment is rooted in the cultivation of a tightly-knit, collectivist identity, Mercy Corps' prevention efforts focus on providing community-based alternatives: incorporating

youth into peaceful groups, mentorship, and creating opportunities for youth to build individual identities and positive family connections.

e. ISIS projects a narrative that it is the defender of the Sunni Ummah against Shia aggression, from the Alawi Assad regime, to Hezbollah, Iran, and Maliki's government in Iraq. This can trigger multiple identities among Jordanians: religious obligations to defend fellow Sunnis, a political enmity with Assad, and a masculine obligation to defend Sunni women and children. One of Mercy Corps' interviewees said "Jihad was their duty as Muslim men to protect their sisters… they learned it here, in the home." The counter-narrative that ISIS are violent extremists and un-Islamic, gained greater traction in Jordan following the immolation of the Jordanian pilot, First-Lieutenant Muath Al-Kaseasbeh, by Islamic State (IS) in February 2015. Many communities moved to denounce the group and NGOs were given the opportunity to work with communities to help amplify messages and reduce the appeal of IS.

f. VE groups gain community acceptance and often recruit youth with a compelling narrative. We found in northeast Nigeria that locally articulated and delivered messages were cited as an important reason why youth resisted joining Boko Haram. Characterising Boko Haram as a corrupt organisation appealed to youth who may have otherwise been drawn to Boko Haram's original message of fighting against government corruption. We suggest counter-narratives are more likely to take root where constructive alternate messages are developed and disseminated by local leaders and only after a thorough analysis of the recruitment and communication strategies of the VE group.

Which actors are engaging and who should be partners?

12. In addition to building local capacity to implement future programmes to counter violent extremism, we recognise more than ever that local actors have trusted relationships within communities. Civil society can bring credibility where overseas governments and donors are viewed with suspicion. International NGOs must therefore seek partnerships with national civil society and ensure programmes are locally articulated, designed and driven.

13. Mercy Corps' 2015 public opinion survey covered 16 Iraqi provinces and 5,606 randomly selected Iraqi citizens. It showed that Iraqis consider civil society organisations (CSO) as the best actors to provide aid, resolve issues related to security and government services and hold the Iraqi government accountable. A particularly successful example of CSO engagement comes from the Iraqi governorate of Diyala where Mercy Corps supported a CSO to address local grievances with local government officials. As a result of negotiations between the CSO and local government, water was piped to the community for the first time in two years.

14. Cultural and faith organisations also make valuable partners, particularly where grievances are rooted in sectarian differences or interpretations of religious texts. However, right-sizing the role of ideology and religion as drivers of VE is important and should be considered in the choice of partner.

What are the common programming mistakes?

15. Programmes can easily exacerbate frustrations and grievances about social and economic inequality, especially where is weak understanding of local dynamics. A common example is in delivering lengthy vocational training programmes with poor and economically marginalised youth when there is no market demand for the skills acquired. Another common mistake is to implement civic engagement programmes where there is low government receptiveness to incorporating new voices into decision-making processes. Stymied attempts at political engagement only intensify existing feelings of being ignored. In Somalia we found that youth who are more engaged politically are more likely to use violence to achieve their political goals, which we hypothesise is precisely because the government is not receptive to peaceful change. Finally, demographic profiling of individuals based on their socio-economic background or religious conviction is at a minimum unlikely to be successful, and at worse counterproductive and fuel feelings of injustice.

Have previous programmes or strategies been value for money?

16. Violent conflict begets violent extremism. Investments that reduce and build community resilience to violence therefore help get ahead of fragility, violent conflict and violent extremism, making them in the long term good value for money.

17. Without multi-year funding, programme impact and learning are harder to identify, and local relationships less well developed. To ensure value for money, conduct research and generate learning from ongoing programming.

18. Counter-terrorism approaches and the emphasis on securitised interventions under the banner of countering violent extremism have in some places created more violence and driven grievances. Securitised and militarised approaches are extremely well-funded despite not solving the problem set of violent extremism. At the same time, governments cannot afford to keep up with vast increases in global humanitarian spending.

What parallels can be drawn from other settings?

19. Mercy Corps' research shows similarities between programmes seeking to prevent recruitment into VE groups in the MENA, and recruitment into gangs in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC).

20. Common to both regions, drivers of participation in violence include:

    a. Socio-economic drivers: social isolation, masculinities and gender expectations, exclusion and inequality, and lack of meaningful employment and economic opportunity.
    b. Political drivers: inadequacy of state judicial systems which create perceptions of injustice, though these manifest differently – in MENA as physical abuses from state security forces and overt injustices, and in LAC, a general lack of the rule of law.

![Mercy Corps logo]

c. Psychological drivers: experiences of violence and trauma, and search for identity and meaning, which results in thrill-seeking.

21. Solutions common to both regions include:

   d. Hard security approaches fail in both contexts. Heavy-handed security responses in LAC have generally failed to reduce violence in the long-term and, as in MENA too, have at times bred more resentment towards the government.
   e. Comprehensive, multi-sector efforts to work with communities to prevent violence have had more success in the LAC context than single-pronged approaches. Particularly effective elements include: Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT); taking a family-based approach; a public health approach; vocational training to expand economic opportunities; and a schools-based approach for children and adolescents.
   f. As with MENA, the LAC experience indicates that combining community-based prevention programmes with long-term security and justice sector reform may lead to sustainable improvements in relationships between communities and the government and its security forces.
   g. Specifically working with youth at risk of violence in general development programmes, with a positive youth development approach, can help provide social and economic opportunities for youth and lead to a reduction in violence.

What role can state education systems play in building resilience?

22. Lack of equitable, quality education and political marginalization are often cited as drivers for youth joining violent groups. To fill a gap in empirical research, Mercy Corps carried out a rigorous mixed-methods impact evaluation of a youth-focused stability programme in Somaliland, funded by USAID, known as the Somali Youth Leaders Initiative (SYLI). The research tested the impact of increasing access to formal education and civic engagement opportunities on youth participation in and support for political violence. Both of these types of interventions are prominent priorities in the Somali National Strategy and Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism.

23. The research findings challenge some common assumptions. Although improving access to secondary education through this program reduced youth participation in political violence by 16%, it increased support for political violence by 11%. However, when combining secondary education with civic engagement opportunities that allow youth to carry out community action campaigns, both participation in and support for violence drop significantly, by 14% and 20% respectively.

24. Giving youth in schools the ability to participate in civic engagement activities alongside formal education, it seems, fulfils a common desire among youth—the desire to do something positive, meaningful and impactful. Addressing this need, our research indicates, is one way to steer youth away from a path towards violence. Creating a sense of empowerment for youth and giving them hope in the possibility of making a difference through nonviolent actions are pathways through which civic engagement activities can support stability-related outcomes.

25. Our findings signal that education by itself does not fully address the underlying drivers of potentially destabilising actions such as support for political violence. By increasing young

people's concern about future employment prospects and their dissatisfaction with government's provision of education, schooling does not relieve youths' frustrations; rather it can compound them.

26. We therefore urge international donors, development agencies, and national governments to:
    h. Ensure that youth education programmes with violence reduction goals work to simultaneously improve access to school, enhance the quality of education, and increase access to community or civic engagement opportunities.
    i. Provide greater support to initiatives to improve the quality of education.
    j. Increase government investment, engagement, and visibility in development projects, particularly in education.

How can the UK government support overseas governments?

27. Preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) has gained prominence among multilateral organisations and donor governments in recent years. While supporting positive interventions, we urge the UK government to investigate any accusations of abuse by governments receiving support for CVE projects. In turn, we ask that UK ministries delivering CSSF projects make explicit how support is not inadvertently exacerbating grievances.

28. Many governments still view violent extremism as a problem that needs solving exclusively with security actors. The UK government should support other governments to bring greater national-level attention to and support for community level initiatives.

29. Development and peacebuilding practitioners are gathering evidence of what works in violence reduction and building resilience to violent extremism. We need political leadership to support and scale community driven long-term approaches that address the key drivers to political violence. This also means advocating that overseas governments adopt this approach in designing National Action Plans on P/CVE.

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