A Global Solutions Exchange Event

#GSX2017 – Innovations in Civil Society and Other Locally-Led Efforts to Prevent Violent Extremism

21 September 2017

Overview and Recommendations[1]

OVERVIEW

On 21 September 2017, on the margins of the 72nd UN General Assembly, the Global Solutions Exchange (GSX) marked its first year of activity by hosting *#GSX2017 – Innovations in Civil Society and Other Locally-Led Efforts to Prevent Violent Extremism*. The all-day event brought dozens of civil society practitioners—many at the helm of women's and youth organizations including members of the global networks such as the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL)—from around the globe together with representatives from national and local authorities and multilateral institutions, to highlight their unique contributions to reducing recruitment and radicalization into violence in their communities. More than 180 policymakers, practitioners, diplomats, and experts attended the event.

As violent extremist movements deepen their local roots, contextualized responses by local actors are more important than ever. Speakers at #GSX2017 illustrated their pioneering, diverse, positive, and sustainable efforts aimed at preventing violent extremism (PVE), often through promoting pluralism and inclusivity, and offering positive alternatives to those most at risk. Participants spoke of their attempts to build trust between law enforcement and local communities and to support the rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) of returning fighters, violent extremists, and their victims. Sessions highlighted the value of stronger collaboration between national and local actors on PVE and how an inclusive process of developing and delivering national action plans (NAPs) and strategies can help achieve that. Participants also emphasized the important contribution that local, multidisciplinary networks can make to PVE and to building social cohesion more broadly.

Participants underlined the innovative approaches that each sector brings to PVE and the necessity of ensuring diversity in the planning, design, implementation, and monitoring of national and local strategies. Despite their contributions, however, the representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs) reminded the audience of the ways in which the legal and political space for CSOs is shrinking in certain contexts, often in the name of counterterrorism (CT), and stressed that governments and multilateral institutions must recognize and support independent civil society as a strong partner in PVE.

The discussions also emphasized the need for greater attention to structural factors and direct actions that actors can take in the realms of education, economic empowerment, security, religion, and culture to prevent violent extremism.

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[1] The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of all meeting participants or all members of the Global Solutions Exchange Steering Group. The recommendations are nonbinding.

#GSX2017 exemplified why and how a *whole of society* approach is the path toward not only the prevention of violent extremism, but also the promotion of pluralistic, resilient societies. #GSX2017 marked a significant step forward in solidifying the participation of local actors and networks in policy conversations around PVE. It demonstrated that the GSX platform offers a practical and necessary space to enable sustained collaboration, cooperation, analysis, and solution sharing among the different sectors and across different regions and countries.

The following key themes emerged during the discussion:

- The most effective PVE approaches and programs entail practical, positive measures undertaken by communities or CSOs to reduce radicalization and recruitment to violent extremism. These also contribute to shifting community and societal attitudes towards pluralism, inclusivity, social cohesion, and non-violence.

- Trust, as a basis for meaningful engagement between different stakeholders, is critical; CSOs often act as trusted intermediaries in communities that have had negative experiences with the state and in which radicalization to violent extremism is taking root.

- Access to local communities, particularly those most at risk of potential radicalization, is essential; local actors are often best placed to enable this access because of the trusted relationships they

have through their community ties as well as their demonstrable record of accomplishment in providing support.

- Global networks such as WASL, Extremely Together, and the Strong Cities Network (SCN) that have been launched are positive and critical to enabling locally rooted actors to engage and collaborate globally and ensuring the development of good practices and sharing of lessons learned among women, youth, and local community leaders, as well as for enabling direct engagement with policy makers at the national, regional, and global levels.

- Reintegration and rehabilitation programs are sensitive and difficult to undertake; CSOs are well placed to initiate inclusive initiatives that resonate with the affected communities and to help these societies internalize these ideas. They are also able to identify the challenges for effective R&R—such as the threats that returnees face from militia groups and security forces as well as their social stigmatization.

- There are a range of effective models of collaboration between CSOs and law enforcement and other government actors, including in R&R efforts, and they demonstrate that trust can be fostered through continuous interactions and, based on the comparative advantages that each actor brings, can overcome obstacles and enable effective partnership.

- PVE NAPs can play a critical role in stimulating a *whole of government* and *whole of society* approach to PVE policy and program design and delivery. Given their added value, it is essential to ensure independent, local CSOs are involved in the NAP development and implementation process and that gender and youth perspectives are considered throughout.

- An increasing number of municipalities are undertaking multiagency, local PVE, resilience, and social cohesion activities that involve CSOs and the private sector and strengthen collaboration between local authorities and the communities they represent.

- Horizontal collaboration among local authorities, communities, CSOs, and the private sector in undertaking multiagency, social cohesion activities should be strengthened as a key strategy for raising public awareness about the recruitment and messaging tactics of violent extremist movements, thus building resilience among at-risk communities through fostering stronger intercommunal and intersectoral ties.

- Platforms such as the GSX are essential to enabling more regular vertical cooperation between local, national, and global actors, particularly in developing and reviewing policies and priorities to ensure they are not doing harm and that they are addressing the real and right challenges on the ground.

- An independent, vibrant civil society sector is a key pillar for the effective prevention of violent extremism. The trend toward the shrinking of legal and political space for this sector—particularly for CSOs active in PVE, human rights, and peace and security efforts—is an urgent concern and governments and multilateral institutions should take steps to address and reverse the trend.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Dignity, human rights, and human security as a starting point:** These issues need to be at the center of all PVE strategies, addressing the long-term structural injustices and more direct poor governance and securitized responses that so often contribute to the conditions giving rise to violent extremism.

> In Bangladesh, Young Power in Social Action is working to address radicalization and recruitment of Rohingya migrants and is developing new material to explain violent extremism, promote non-violence, and highlight how people from different religions and cultures can coexist.

2. **Terminology matters:** Use of PVE or "violent extremism" terminology can be counterproductive in certain contexts, as it may have a negative impact on the work or hinder it all together. In certain circumstances, this language can alienate communities, giving the impression that there is something wrong or needs fixing and that the beneficiaries are a threat. Policies and programs should be framed around issues and terminology that resonate the most with the relevant communities. Local CSOs are best placed to identify these and inform policymakers and international stakeholders of the dangers associated with certain terminology.

3. **Promotion of positive messaging and alternatives:** Instead of solely disputing or countering violent extremist ideologies, positive, PVE actors need to craft alternative messages that clearly vocalize what societies are "for" rather than "against. These can be focused on tolerance, pluralism, freedom and democratic values, and can suggest practical alternatives such as decent livelihood options and ways for individuals to contribute to societal wellbeing and justice.

4. **PVE should be a multi-stakeholder, gendered, "whole of society" effort:** PVE approaches need to be inclusive, with attention to the gender and age dimensions of those at risk, and build upon and integrate the work of all stakeholders. This includes CSOs, especially women- and youth-led organizations, as well as faith-based organizations, the private sector, national and local governments, and multilateral institutions.
    a. The ideology, strategies, tactics, and actions of violent extremist movements are deeply gendered, both in terms of their outreach and expectations of men and their co-option and targeting of women. They tap into the aspirations and grievances of men and women in tailored ways that are often context- and culturally specific. PVE strategies and initiatives need to recognize this fact and adapt accordingly, including through working closely with women-focused and -led organizations from the assessment, design, and planning stages through to implementation and evaluation.
    b. Youth should be viewed and listened to as being part of the solution and as positive change agents, as opposed to being part of the problem. This means actors need to:
        i. Tap into their energy and skills to be productive citizens; this is critical to PVE efforts over the long term, but requires providing them with an entry point for engagement with policy- and decision-makers;

ii. Ensure that the perspectives and grievances of young people and youth-focused organizations are heard by policymakers in discussions around violent extremism and that they are included in the design and implementation of PVE policies and programs;

iii. Prioritize psycho-social interventions that teach youth to manage their emotions tied to managing and positively building on grievances; and

iv. Encourage public-private resource mobilization for more youth programs in those communities where feelings of marginalization, exclusion, and injustice are strongest.

> Mercy Corp's program in Jordan teaches youth in marginalized communities to manage feelings of injustice and hopelessness through sports, such as rock-climbing, accompanied with psycho-social interventions.

5. **In the development of PVE policies, programs, and activities, governments, multilateral institutions, and other relevant entities should:**

   a. **Treat civil society as an ally, not an adversary:** CSOs have expertise and experience in both identifying and addressing the local factors that lead to violent extremism; have trust and access within communities susceptible to violent extremist recruitment in ways that national and multilateral institutions do not; are willing and able to be innovative and flexible to identify and tackle emerging issues; provide a space for productive engagement between governments and local communities; and can share what works and does not and explain why some communities are more resilient to violent extremism than others.

   b. **Remove legal, political, and financial impediments to existing civil society-led PVE action:** Assess and remove impediments to the legal and political space for CSOs working to serve communities and address the drivers of violent extremism. This is a matter of good governance and critical to prevention.

   c. **Facilitate more sustained networking with CSOs around PVE:** Many CSOs are involved in PVE work (whether labeled as such or not) and these organizations need to be better networked nationally, regionally, and globally so they can be empowered and more readily learn from and share with each other. Furthermore, domestic PVE networks should be developed to strengthen collaboration among national, municipal, and community-based stakeholders across various disciplines, including through the co-design of strategies and programs that local authorities and CSOs can execute. These networks should include policymakers, practitioners (both law enforcement and non-law enforcement), researchers, CSOs, and other independent experts.

   > The East Africa Civil Society Organizations Hub was launched to support and deepen a "network of networks" for national and regional CSOs and other independent actors such as academics, religious leaders, and community representatives working to prevent violent extremism in the region.

6. **Lead with the local:** PVE should be led by local actors. Municipalities, schools, community leaders, and CSOs all have a role to play—top-down strategies and approaches will not be as effective.

   a. Municipalities and other local actors from different countries and regions should learn from each other, including about how to develop effective, multidisciplinary PVE coordination bodies such as the Strong Cities Network's Local Prevention Network model currently operating in Jordan and Lebanon.

   b. Local practitioners should exchange lessons learned on different aspects of their work, including the use of social media as a tool for prevention and their experiences in youth integration and community–law enforcement trust-building.

   c. Identify and remove barriers to more effective cooperation among different levels and sectors of actors within a country.

> The local prevention network in Zarqa, Jordan involves teachers, community and tribal leaders, civil society, political party members, youth groups, and local police, with a focus on building social cohesion.

7. **Support and sustain the global:** The global CSO and community- based networks such as WASL and Strong Cities that have emerged are essential to enabling efficient sharing of knowledge and practice. These platforms require sustained support to enable a deepening of the local actions and continued critical input into global policy fora.

8. **Use sports, arts, and culture in PVE efforts:** Arts, sports, and media can be useful to not only engage communities in PVE, but also transform communities through long-term effects on individuals. By finding a common interest and a shared sense of belonging, individuals and communities are better able to connect with each other, creating a level of trust that is fundamental to overcoming challenges that can divide them. Innovative partnerships involving media and social media companies should be pursued to develop and disseminate tailored stories discussing issues of pluralism and coexistence to reach youth in marginalized communities.

9. **Enhance capacity building of CSOs and other local actors:** CSOs, especially those outside of major and metropolitan areas, need more training and other capacity-building support to allow them to engage effectively in PVE work. More CSOs need to be adequately resourced so they are in a position not only to effectively access, implement, and monitor the impact of donor grants, but also to engage, as appropriate, in policy discussions around PVE at the local, national, regional, and global levels. In addition, donors should support the provision of tailored PVE training to CSOs that are new to the PVE domain but have relevant experience in related fields, to better position them to integrate PVE into their related, ongoing programs, as well as to inform PVE policies and agendas with their pertinent perspectives.

> The Local Democracy and Citizen Participation Council in Dakar facilitates dialogue between elected officials and citizens to promote social cohesion and reduce violence.

10. **Integrate PVE in general violence-prevention efforts:** PVE policies and programs should learn from and build upon existing prevention approaches for other forms of violence that have proven to be

effective.

11. **Address stigmatization and marginalization:** Providing a safe space for local actors working on PVE activities is a key component to facilitating and sustaining this work. Equally important is to account for the potential stigmatization that victims, violent extremists and returnees, and their family members can face within their communities and from their governments. CSOs can identify these sensitivities and develop PVE and R&R approaches that try to prevent the further stigmatization of already marginalized populations.

12. **Ensure that comprehensive and tailored R&R efforts are a core element of any PVE strategy**: Such efforts should:
    a. Include a range of programs, e.g., psycho-social, religious, vocational, educational, arts, and sports;
    b. Build on existing reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts and/or other traditional mechanisms, where appropriate;
    c. Address the needs of the family, wider community, and victim; not simply the perpetrator;
    d. Facilitate the involvement of relevant CSOs and the community more broadly;
    e. Be based on a comprehensive legal and policy framework to enable CSOs to work with returnees and former violent extremists; and

    > Advocacy for Women in Peace and Security–Africa (a member of WASL), facilitates engagement between police, victims of violent extremism and communities in Kenya to create trust and work jointly on the rehabilitation and reintegration of former violent extremists.

    f. Promote constructive, continuous engagement (e.g., information sharing) between law enforcement and communities, including relevant CSOs, throughout the design and implementation phase of R&R programs.

13. **Develop inclusive PVE NAPs:** National authorities need to ensure that:
    a. They follow a broad, multi-stakeholder platform and process to design and coordinate the implementation of NAPs; rather than trying to do it alone, they should include CSOs, municipalities, and other local actors, and establish mechanisms to coordinate among all relevant stakeholders, based on trust and transparency;

    > Nigeria formed a network of some 69 CSOs dealing with a range of PVE issues to engage with during the NAP design process.

    b. NAPs are built on evidence-based research on the drivers of violent extremism in different communities, as well as the drivers of social cohesion, peace, and effective community and institutional practices, so that they strengthen the positive forces and do not inadvertently do harm;
    c. Education, economic, security, and other sectoral programming in NAPs are gender and age sensitive;
    d. NAPs include specific deliverables for all institutions and actors, which could positively affect the coordination and communication among all stakeholders;

e. They support the development and implementation of NAPs with the necessary resources and political will.

14. **Ensure PVE remains a priority for the international community, including the United Nations**
   a. Facilitate structured engagement between CSOs and multilateral bodies to ensure the voices and perspectives of civil society are heard in multilateral conversations about terrorism and violent extremism; this engagement could include GSX-organized "civil society days" on the margins of multilateral CT or PVE conferences, including during the UN General Assembly's sixth biennial review of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and the OSCE counterterrorism conference in 2018.

   > The Prevention Project convened CSOs for a "civil society day" on the margins of the May 2017 OSCE CT Conference to allow them to share their perspectives on the issues on the formal conference agenda and provide practical recommendations to the OSCE structures and OSCE Participating States.

   b. Establish a CSO advisory board to liaise with the UN, in particular, the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the UN Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate, as well as the recently established PVE Group of Friends, on an ongoing basis to ensure that CSO perspectives are heard and reflected in UN PVE and CT policies, programs, and dialogues; and
   c. Strengthen cooperation between the UNOCT and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights as part of an effort to further prioritize respect for human rights, including freedom of expression, as part of international CT and PVE efforts.

About the GSX:

The Global Solutions Exchange (GSX) is an independent global civil society platform dedicated to PVE by enabling a "whole of society approach" through systematic engagement between local CSOs, particularly women- and youth-led organizations, governments, and multilateral bodies, to share knowledge and tested solutions that reduce radicalization and recruitment to violence, and promote peace, rights, equality, and pluralism. **See** here **for more information on what GSX does and why it is unique.**

We thank the diverse group of donors[2] that provided funding and other support to make this event possible and encourage all stakeholders to become involved in the GSX and, more broadly, to continue to champion the role of civil society and local actors in PVE at all levels.

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