

YOUTH, SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL CHANGE, AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN NIGER

LAUREN VAN METRE, JASMINE RAMSEY, OPEYEMI ADEOJO,
AND KAREN BERNSTEIN

LEARNING FROM LOCAL PEACEBUILDING APPROACHES

“Creating meaningful avenues for youth political participation and decision-making is an important antidote to the strategic intent of violent extremists in Niger.”

FAST FACTS

- Malign perceptions of youth, in some cases reinforced by P/CVE policies, can have the impact of supporting the continued marginalization of youth, further motivating young people to seek alternative sources of agency and status, including through violent extremist groups
- P/CVE policies and programs must pay attention to the critical role played by political actors and institutions in perpetuating youth marginalization
- Effective P/CVE policy and practice must be grounded in a deep understanding of the norms, beliefs, and behaviors facilitating youth marginalization and exclusion.

Context

For years, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers have focused on youth as both: (1) at risk of predatory violent extremist behaviors and, (2) as key stakeholders in improving resilience against violent extremism. In Africa, now regarded as a global epicenter of violent extremism,¹ questions remain about how best to engage youth to address violent extremism, both locally and on the international stage.² This is of particular importance in the Lake Chad Basin, where groups like

1 Vibhu Mishra, “Africa Now Global ‘Epicentre’ of Terrorism: UN Chief,” UN News, January 24, 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/01/1145852>.

2 Marc Sommers, *Youth and the Field of Countering Violent Extremism* (Promundo-US, 2019), <https://www.equimundo.org/resources/youth-and-the-field-of-countering-violent-extremism/>.

Boko Haram and the self-proclaimed Islamic State's West African Province (ISWAP) have targeted youth for both voluntary and forced recruitment.³ There, these groups have exploited a growing humanitarian crisis resulting in increased youth insecurity, food insecurity, environmental degradation, and school closures, and an increase in early marriages for girls.⁴

In Niger, violent extremism flourishes amidst an intricate political interplay for governance control among local administrations, traditional leaders, and violent extremist groups. Shocks to the region, increasingly porous borders, climate shifts, and ethnic conflict combine with these and other factors (e.g., discrepancies in educational opportunity) leaving open many gaps that violent extremist groups can exploit.⁵ According to a local conflict analysis conducted in 2022 by the National Democratic Institute (NDI),⁶ these factors have had a critical impact on youth, and rural youth in particular, including by fostering:

- Unemployed and impoverished youth working in trafficking networks—including trafficking of arms, cigarettes, fuel, animals; and
- Youth migration north to Libya and Algeria and their gateways to Europe.

The violence and exploitation of youth in these illicit criminal and migratory networks made them more vulnerable to violent extremism. The increased risk of violent extremism for youth, in turn, increased their marginalization by community leaders, who consider young people opportunistic and corruptible by promises of wealth.⁷

Distrust of government runs deep among youth in Niger's frontline communes, where traditional inter-tribal governance is struggling due to shrinking resources and the impact of conflict, such as significant displacement. Youth criticize political party leaders for their manipulation of inter-ethnic tensions and elections in ways that harm youth and maintain elite positions of political power.⁸

3 Niamh Punton, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Siobhan O'Neil, Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Anamika Madhuraj, and Saniya Ali, "Child Recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin," *Managing Exits from Armed Conflicts (MEAC) Findings Report 22* (United Nations University, 2022).

4 Oduoye, Malik Olatunde et al., "Humanitarian Crisis amid the Military Coup in Niger Republic; What Went Wrong?" *Health Science Reports* 7, no. 6 (June 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1002/hsr2.2180>.

5 Rahmane Idrissa and Bethany McGann, *Mistrust and Imbalance: The Collapse of Intercommunal Relations and the Rise of Armed Community Mobilization on the Niger-Mali Border* (RESOLVE Network, 2021).

6 NDI has engaged for eight years in community-focused P/CVE programming in ten communes on the front lines in Niger. The conflict analysis that supported this work was conducted by NDI's local partner Rail in three rural communities and three villages in the Abala and Tassara communes in the Tillaberi and Tahoua regions of Niger, respectively, located on the Niger-Mali border.

7 National Democratic Institute, Conflict analysis of two rural communities in Niger, conducted by the Riall Institute, 2022.

8 Sambe Bakary, "Youth Violence and the Challenges of Violent Extremism in Zinder," (International Organization for Migration Publications, 2018), 21; 50–52. <https://publications.iom.int/fr/books/youth-violence-and-challenges-violent-extremism-zinder>.

Political polarization, where opposition parties criticize the state as an attack on the party of power, predisposes youth to anti-state messaging by violent extremist groups. Due to political predation and polarization specifically,⁹ some youth were primed to conduct religious-based attacks in support of the extremist agenda.¹⁰ Violent extremist groups exploit state and government failure, corruption, and predation to offer youth agency and status in their state-building and governance endeavors. Thus, creating meaningful avenues for youth political participation and decision-making is an important antidote to the strategic intent of violent extremist messaging, recruitment, and operations in Niger and similar states.¹¹

A Youth-focused Approach to P/CVE

In 2022, amidst a backdrop of growing violent extremism in the region, NDI launched a pilot preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) program for youth in Abala, a commune in Niger. The program also integrated social and behavioral change (SBC) research and approaches in youth-political party programming from 2022–2023. The primary objective of the pilot was to establish youth as the experts on their lived experience of violent extremism. The pilot did so by bringing rural and village youth together to understand the intersectional risk of violent extremism in their commune and to design programming by and for youth to address that complex threat. With the understanding that women in Niger, especially in rural communities, were not bystanders in violent extremist operations (instead involved in recruitment and funding), gender was also a central aspect of this pilot’s intersectional approach.¹² The program included a subsequent phase aimed at bringing youth leaders together with community and political party leaders to advocate for youth-led P/CVE analysis and programming. This phase held considerable risk due to the stereotypes and intransigent beliefs held by youth and political leaders in Niger.

9 The United Nations Development Programme and a report by the United Nations Human Rights Council’s Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism seem to confirm that the actions of the state and political elite can function as the most significant driver of violent extremism in Africa. For more, see: United Nations Development Program, *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment*, 2017, <https://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/v1/en/reports>; and UN Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism, *Human Rights Impact of Policies and Practices Aimed at Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism* (United Nations: February 21, 2020), 8, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3872336?v=pdf#files>.

10 Bakary, “Youth Violence and the Challenges of Violent Extremism in Zinder,” 21; 50–2.

11 Maria J. Stephan, “Civil Resistance versus ISIS,” *Journal of Resistance Studies* 1, no. 2 (2015), <https://resistance-journal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Issue-2-Article-4.pdf>; and Mercy Corps, *Critical Choices: Assessing the Effects of Education and Engagement on Somali Youths’ Propensity for Violence*, November 21, 2016, <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/effect-education-civic-engagement-somali-youth>.

12 USAID/West Africa, “Gender Analysis and Violent Extremism,” *Evaluation and Analytical Services for the Regional Peace and Governance Programs*, 2015, https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00N7K8.pdf.

Acknowledging that these deep-seated stereotypes and beliefs presented real barriers to successful outcomes, NDI reached out to Beyond Conflict to work with local partner SOS Civisme to research, design, and integrate experimental SBC research and interventions. These included radio programming and community dialogues that targeted norms and beliefs concerning youth that were being perpetuated by elites to maintain their exclusionary systems of power, such as the notion that youth lack decision-making and leadership capacity. The programming also focused on the importance of youth leadership and agency in P/CVE efforts.

Based on findings from this joint initiative, this policy note presents considerations and recommendations to better understand and address youth vulnerability to violent extremism in Niger. More broadly, the note demonstrates the under-utilized potential to incorporate behavioral science into P/CVE programming for greater, more durable impact.

Relevance to Policy & Practice

Early P/CVE approaches among state and non-state actors overemphasized youth risk and vulnerability by focusing on presumed deviance and contributing socio-ecological factors. In doing so, these approaches also inadvertently reinforced the very stereotypes that political actors exploit to maintain their exclusionary grip on power.¹³ Malign perceptions of youth, in some cases reinforced by P/CVE policies, can have the impact of supporting the continued marginalization of youth. This, in turn, can further youth disaffection or motivate young people to seek alternative sources of agency and status, including through violent extremist groups.

In Niger, traditional elite and political party leaders, especially in rural communities, have hyped youth involvement in violent extremism to label youth as too violent or irresponsible to participate in community life. In this way, elites can further entrench their systematic marginalization of youth in political, economic, and social spheres. Importantly, despite these dynamics and stereotypes, most youth were found through our research in Niger to be either: (1) disaffected, or (2) actively seeking out constructive roles in their communities—they were not found to be particularly violent or to be seeking out violence.¹⁴

Development-oriented responses to P/CVE have offered youth avenues for engagement and em-

¹³ For example, in Cote d'Ivoire dehumanizing disadvantaged youth by calling them microbes justifies their political predation by political and business leaders. Sebastien Hervieu, "The Microbes of Abidjan," Enact Research Paper 30, March 2022, <https://enact-africa.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/2022-07-04-microbes-of-abidjan.pdf>.

¹⁴ NDI, Conflict analysis of two rural communities in Niger.

powerment. Still, these responses often fall short in dismantling the social rules, practices, and structures that systematically deny youth and other groups participation in political decision-making in their communities. It is these deeply entrenched systems of exclusion that lie at the heart of the violent extremist problem. To effectively address the root causes of youth vulnerability to radicalization, it is critical to recognize and confront the norms and beliefs that support the unequal distribution of power and inequality of opportunities in local communities.¹⁵ This is relevant in many African countries, where rapid population growth has led to a “youth bulge,” exacerbating the disconnect between young people’s aspirations and the limited economic and political opportunities available to them. In nations like Niger, where over 50 percent of the population is under fifteen years old, addressing these systemic barriers to youth inclusion is not just a matter of preventing extremism, but a fundamental necessity for sustainable development and social stability.

Moreover, P/CVE policies and programs must pay attention to the critical role played by political actors and institutions in perpetuating youth marginalization. This includes the failure of those actors and institutions to hold leaders accountable for their role in increasing the risk of violent extremist recruitment and operations. An International Organization for Migration (IOM) study of youth violence in the town of Zinder, Niger, pinpointed youth disappointment in how political leaders seemed to cultivate their vote at elections.¹⁶ The study also pinpointed their cynical abandonment after relegating youth to bystanders in political decisions that affect their lives.¹⁷ NDI’s local conflict analysis in 2022 confirmed that electoral manipulation and the perceived abandonment of youth have been significant political drivers in other Nigerien communities.¹⁸ The analysis, involving focus groups and interviews with diverse youth and community leaders additionally, uncovered critical insights, including the following:

- Deeply rooted societal norms and beliefs systematically exclude youth from political and decision-making processes.
- Negative stereotypes about youth are often used to justify this exclusion.
- This marginalization significantly increases youth vulnerability to violent extremist recruitment.¹⁹

15 Lauren Van Metre and Linda Bishai, “Why Violent Extremism Still Spreads” *Just Security*, March 11, 2019, <https://www.justsecurity.org/63169/violent-extremism-spreads/>.

16 Bakary, “Youth Violence,” 51–2.

17 Ibid.

18 NDI, Conflict analysis of two rural communities.

19 The local conflict analysis conducted by NDI partner Rail in three rural communes and three villages in Abala and Tassara communes, for a total of six communities, interviewed a total of 218 residents, including government officials, mayors, leaders of ethnic groups and political parties, youth leaders, youth and women heads of civil society organizations, and civil

These findings illuminate the complex interplay between cultural attitudes, political practices, and youth radicalization risks in Niger, with implications for P/CVE policy and practice. They also highlight the importance of recognizing that growing youth distrust in so-called “democratic politics” can align with violent extremists’ visions of an uncorrupted state and be exploited as a youth recruitment tool.

By focusing disproportionately on youth deficits and deviance, rather than on the structural barriers and power imbalances that limit youth agency and voice, P/CVE efforts have missed crucial opportunities to promote genuine and sustained youth political inclusion and empowerment in Niger, and beyond.

Policy & Practice Considerations

Combining past open research with new insights, this policy note provides recommendations based on the Beyond Conflict-NDI-SOS Civisme joint youth P/CVE pilot and research in Niger. The policy note aims to provide guidance to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers, along with a set of practical steps for implementation. The pilot was conducted between August 2023–March 2024, shortly after the July 2023 coup in Niger.²⁰ As such, the recommendations detailed below also touch on the importance of collaborative research with local partners in insecure environments.

Consider underlying power relations between youth, political leaders, and community elders.

The pilot project demonstrated that youth can be powerful agents of change in their communities when given the opportunity. For instance, our research demonstrated that youth viewed themselves—and importantly were also seen by elders—as a bridge in transforming tribal division in the country and assisting to facilitate dialogue between the diverse tribes in the country. Meaningful youth participation in P/CVE initiatives enhances program effectiveness and builds resilience against extremist narratives. Furthermore, youth-informed and youth-led initiatives are more likely to resonate with young people’s lived experiences and aspirations, fostering a sense of ownership and agency in the face of violent extremist promises. By breaking down systems of youth exclusion and elevating youth voices in decision-making processes, policymakers and practitioners can not only enhance the effectiveness of P/CVE efforts, but also cultivate a new generation of youth

society organizations dedicated to youth programming.

20 The United States, among others, has officially recognized the overthrow of the Nigerian government on July 26, 2023, as an illegal coup d’etat. For more, see US Department of State, “Military Coup d’Etat in Niger,” October 10, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/military-coup-detat-in-niger/>.

leaders equipped to tackle other pressing global challenges, such as rising authoritarianism and climate change.

Still, there are important obstacles to youth-led programming, particularly in places like Niger where predatory and corrupt practices carried out by political actors can create structural and normative barriers to meaningful youth political participation and contribute to youth vulnerability to violent extremism. One of the key issues identified in the pilot was the reluctance of political leaders and community elders to entrust youth with substantial leadership roles, often relegating them to subordinate positions under the guise of mentorship. This reluctance was compounded by significant intergenerational perception gaps, where elders' views and judgments were consistently valued above those of youth, who were often judged as lacking critical thinking skills. Elder perceptions on the lack of youth capabilities clashed directly with youth self-efficacy beliefs in their ability to contribute through political engagement. The pilot also observed patterns of political exploitation where political parties and candidates actively engaged youth during election periods, albeit in roles that do not require proven leadership skills, and subsequently excluded them from substantive roles and decision-making processes once elections concluded. Hence, youth do not receive the opportunity to build up leadership skills and experiences. These dynamics created a challenging environment for youth political engagement, fostering disillusionment and eroding trust between young people and political institutions, which according to participants who took part in our focus group discussions, inadvertently increased the appeal of extremist groups.

This reality highlights the importance of conducting a comprehensive assessment before implementing youth leadership programs or policies. This assessment should examine the local cultural context, power dynamics, intergenerational relationships, and discrepancies in opportunities to build leadership skills (including through formal education). This assessment should also explore youth and elders' perspectives, aspirations, and concerns, examining how traditional norms and modern aspirations intersect. It must also consider the broader socio-political landscape, including the influence of violent extremist groups, existing policies, and institutional structures. By understanding these complex dynamics, interventions can be designed to foster meaningful youth participation and leadership while respecting cultural values, addressing underlying tensions, and creating sustainable pathways for intergenerational collaboration.

Consider the role of negative stereotypes impacting youth.

Our initial research in Niger uncovered a pervasive issue of negative stereotyping of youth by community leaders and elders. These stereotypes, which characterize young people as lazy, prone to substance abuse, lacking critical thinking skills, and engaging in criminal or irresponsible behaviors,

have far-reaching consequences. The internalization of these negative perceptions likely diminishes youth self-esteem, discourages their engagement in community affairs, and reduces their motivation to participate in political activities.

Paradoxically, while youth were often labeled in key informant interviews as “leaders of tomorrow,” they face significant barriers to meaningful inclusion in decision-making processes and leadership roles. One important barrier is the lack of opportunities to obtain the necessary qualifications and skills to take on decision-making roles in meaningful and impactful ways. This dichotomy manifests in the tokenization or outright exclusion of young people from positions of influence, further reinforcing their marginalization. The focus group discussions and key informant interviews conducted as a part of this project revealed how youth exclusion and stereotyping contributed to a pernicious cycle of shame. Over time, young people internalize this shame, resulting in low self-esteem, hypervigilance, and self-consciousness in social settings. Shame is likely a significant push factor in creating vulnerability among stigmatized and marginalized youth to violent extremist narratives, making these youth potentially more likely to be targeted for recruitment by violent extremist groups.

What is more, negative stereotypes can impact the ability to even conduct programming. For example, during our project, political party leaders and youth initially resisted collaboration, referencing stereotypical frames. Political leaders believed that the youth in their commune were opportunistic and interested in easy wealth, itinerant—following wealth and opportunity rather than putting down roots in their community, and incompetent due to a lack of employment and experience. Youth, on the other hand, believed most political leaders to be predatory, manipulative, and extractive. Many of these community norms and beliefs were also ingrained within NDI staff and partners, which relied, for example, on community gatekeepers for selecting youth participants and observing program activities. This skewed participant selection and caused youth to self-censor their dialogue and program recommendations. There also existed a general blindness to the impact of violent extremism on young women, despite the research evidence.²¹

Together, these facets highlight the importance of fostering understanding between youth and elders, challenging age-based stereotypes, and bridging generational divides to create more inclusive community structures. We recommend that P/CVE organizations leverage capacity-strengthening efforts to challenge negative stereotypes against youth. This should involve integrating approaches that address cognitive biases, dehumanization, humiliation, shame, identity threat, and trauma re-

21 USAID/West Africa, “Gender Analysis and Violent Extremism.”

sponses that contribute to polarization and youth marginalization. These efforts, like the pilot, must be culturally sensitive and rooted in a deep understanding of local socio-cultural and historical contexts.

Consider intersectionality, overlapping identities, and diverse youth experiences and concerns.

The pilot additionally highlighted that youth in Niger face compounded risks and exclusion based on intersecting identities. These identities—including gender, socioeconomic status, religion, and disability status—create unique vulnerabilities that violent extremist groups have been exploiting. Prominently, the study found that regressive gender norms limited Nigerien youth to rigid societal roles and expectations. This further contributed to feelings of shame among both young women and men who took an active interest in political engagement. Violent extremist groups were said to have exploited these emotions by offering paths to restore the dignity of youth. For young men, traditional notions of masculinity emphasized qualities such as strength, dominance, and the role of “protector and provider,” which violent extremist groups capitalized on to recruit and radicalize them. For these young men who face systemic and constant discrimination, feelings of shame and humiliating experiences can push some towards extremist ideologies, where they believe that joining such groups is a way to assert their masculinity and fulfill their societal roles. Indeed, other studies have found that violent extremist recruiters capitalize on the desire to belong and to be accepted by offering a sense of camaraderie, with promises of improved social and economic status.²²

Similarly, young women faced discrimination and stereotyping when they attempted to become politically involved. They were often shamed into retreating to private spheres, the “proper domain” in which society pressures women to remain and oversee all aspects of domestic life. In this role, women’s influence on behavior within their relationships are significant, as societal norms encourage women to uphold domestic responsibilities and rely on men as protectors.²³ For instance, some men shared that women (mothers, sisters, and peers) who expressed fear or vulnerability during times of unrest and rising inequities sometimes pressured men to take on protective roles—or shamed them when they did not. This reinforced expectations of men as “defenders” and women as “protected.” At the same time, young women who sought to become politically involved faced

22 See report for more detail: United Nations Development Programme, *Dynamics of Violent Extremism in Africa: Conflict Ecosystems, Political Ecology and the Spread of the Proto-state*, 2022.

23 Ann J. Tickner, *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security* (Columbia University Press, 1992).

stigmatization and association with promiscuity and immorality. Some extremist groups with an understanding of these dynamics monopolized the opportunity by offering women alternatives to defy their restricted roles and contribute to a “greater cause.”

Importantly, youth with intersectional marginalized identities were particularly vulnerable to the narratives of extremist groups that seemingly understood their plight. For instance, Nigerien women, especially those from rural areas, faced risks of divorce, disownment, and shame for pursuing political ambitions. Meanwhile, young women with lower socioeconomic status who sought to become politically active were more often stigmatized and hypersexualized compared with their higher socioeconomic status counterparts. In addition, poorer young men were blamed by community leaders for their un- and under-employment. They were also labeled as lazy, selfish, and aggressive—excluding them from political spaces based on these judgments. These dynamics mirror broader research on problematic stereotyping and discriminatory perceptions of identity groups with compounded marginalized identities.²⁴

The project results showcased that shame and stigma, particularly related to gender norms and socioeconomic status, indeed impacted youth vulnerability. P/CVE strategies should consider ways in which intersectional identity-conscious approaches to youth P/CVE efforts can be used to address the psychological implications of these identities. P/CVE strategies should be tailored to address nuanced, context-specific forms of marginalization, ideally by actively partnering with diverse youth and community members as agents of change in designing, implementing, and evaluating P/CVE initiatives.²⁵

Consider incorporating social and behavioral change approaches into P/CVE programming.

This pilot drew on a social and behavioral change (SBC) approach to address the beliefs and norms held about youth that were driving the exclusionary behaviors of community leaders. SBC approaches offer unique value to P/CVE efforts by leveraging insights from cognitive and behavioral sciences to address the psychological underpinnings of violent extremism. While traditional peacebuilding practices often focus on dialogue and awareness-raising, SBC goes further by targeting specific cognitive biases, social norms, and behavioral patterns that contribute to radicalization

24 Claude Steele, “Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69, no. 5 (1995): 797–811.

25 Rebecca Ebenezer-Abiola, “Youth-Centered Peacebuilding Framework: Rethinking Youth Inclusion Through a Youth-Powered Approach,” United States Institute of Peace, May 3, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/05/youth-centered-peace-building-framework>.

and extremism. Further, SBC focuses on achieving specific, measurable changes in behavior, going beyond changes in attitude or knowledge.

Over the past 10 years, Beyond Conflict’s program and research teams have conducted rigorous research in violent conflict contexts. This work resulted in clear diagnoses of destructive social norms and beliefs impacting intergroup relations and conflict dynamics. In each of these contexts, SBC programming has shown positive impacts in addressing these dynamics. For the project in Niger, one of the SBC intervention designs involved creating a community dialogue workshop. Before the workshop, Beyond Conflict trained the local NGO, SOS Civisme, on the brain science of bias and stigma. SOS Civisme then used these insights along with findings from a research study on the role of stigma and exclusion in the lives of local youth—which, along with bias, were found to be likely impacting P/CVE efforts in Niger—²⁶ to help workshop participants understand how these norms can deprive the community of the youth’s energy and ideas for change.

Additionally, drawing on an SBC approach, we developed a series of radio dramas that portrayed positive examples of youth–elder collaboration in Niger, reaching remote communities and sparking local discussions on youth inclusion. Strategically leveraging media and communication strategies is a critical component of effective SBC approaches in P/CVE. Our pilot study highlighted the potential of targeted media campaigns to challenge harmful stereotypes and promote positive narratives about youth leadership. We can amplify youth voices and foster intergenerational dialogue by utilizing a mix of traditional and new media platforms, including community radio, social media, and mobile messaging. Our pilot study revealed that such community-led interventions led to increased trust and support for youth leadership among both elders and youth. For the first time, following these SBC interventions, the community approved youth-designed and -led programming to support community resilience and development.

Implementing SBC approaches can be beneficial in places like Niger and its neighbors,²⁷ where violent extremism coexists with destructive norms and stereotypes that can perpetuate youth exclusion and marginalization. Indeed, many organizations are proactively adopting these approaches and yielding positive results.²⁸

26 This study was conducted by SOS Civisme under the guidance of Beyond Conflict.

27 For example, Beyond Conflict’s research found that stereotyping, negative associations, and dehumanization were linked with high support for violence between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. Based on this finding, Beyond Conflict developed SBC-based media programming that reached tens of millions of Nigerians. A media campaign launched by local civil society partners highlighted the role of tropes, stereotypes, and dehumanizing rhetoric in creating the groundwork for prejudice and support for violence against “the other” to bolster. The campaign challenged community members to stand up against such rhetoric from local leaders.

28 Notably, the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism developed the “Breaking the ISIS Brand” series, which uses video testimonials of former ISIS members to counter extremist narratives. This approach leverages psychological

Conclusion

The findings from our pilot study in Niger highlight the need for a paradigm shift in how we approach youth-focused P/CVE efforts. The considerations detailed above demonstrate that effective P/CVE policy and practice must be grounded in a deep understanding of the norms, beliefs, and behaviors facilitating youth marginalization and exclusion that may contribute to their engagement in violent extremism. By incorporating rigorous and evidence-based SBC research and tools, and by partnering with local institutions, policymakers and practitioners can develop more nuanced and contextually grounded interventions that allow for greater youth engagement in leadership in local power structures. Such a bottom-up approach can also facilitate understanding of implicit and explicit biases held by the community and by program implementers that can impact P/CVE outcomes. This approach marks a significant departure from the often generic and top-down P/CVE programming that has dominated the field to date. Additional recommendations, detailed below, are suggested for those interested in developing and supporting future youth-focused P/CVE efforts. They are also suggested for those interested in developing and supporting future SBC P/CVE initiatives for youth in Niger and beyond.

Recommendations for Youth P/CVE Programming

By centering youth perspectives and agency, challenging exclusionary norms, and addressing the complex interplay of factors that drive youth vulnerability to extremism, we can develop more effective, sustainable P/CVE strategies. This approach mitigates the risk of violent extremism and empowers youth as key partners in building resilient, peaceful communities. Future strategies should prioritize:

- Educating community leaders on how the exclusion of youth increases the risk to their communities of violent extremist recruitment and operations grounded in local research and analysis;
- Creating sustainable, community-led programs that foster youth-elder trust and ensure substantive youth leadership roles;
- Actively involving youth in all stages of P/CVE initiatives, from design to implementation and evaluation;

principles of narrative persuasion and social proof to change attitudes and behaviors. Mercy Corps implemented their “Somali Youth Leaders Initiative,” which engaged SBC elements in the contexts of civic engagement to identify and intervene on youth and community members’ perceptions and key behaviors leveraged by VEOs for recruitment.

- Developing youth-led media campaigns and platforms to challenge negative narratives about young people; and
- Implementing strategies to address power imbalances between youth and authority figures, including proven methods from the democracy and governance field, such as civic education, political process monitoring, participatory and deliberative democracy fora, political party leadership academies, etc.

Recommendations for SBC Approaches to P/CVE Programming

Drawing from our pilot's innovative integration of social and behavioral change (SBC) approaches into P/CVE programming in Niger, we propose three key recommendations to translate our pilot's insights into scalable practices:

- Support the establishment of a community of practice that identifies effective, practical SBC-oriented P/CVE initiatives that are easily integrated into youth P/CVE programming, making SBC more accessible to local practitioners. This includes supporting long-term programming that allows for the gradual shift in social norms and behaviors identified in our study, moving beyond short-term project cycles that often fail to change the fundamental norms, beliefs, and behaviors held by authorities that are harmful to youth.
- Develop a specialized training program for P/CVE practitioners on integrating SBC methodologies. This program should draw directly from our pilot's successes in addressing shame, stigma, and negative stereotypes about youth, and provide practical tools for replication in diverse contexts. These trainings could serve as the basis for train-the-trainer (ToT) sessions with local stakeholders to cascade and sustain the training.
- Implement an adaptive monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework specifically designed for SBC-integrated P/CVE programs. This framework should include context-specific indicators that measure changes in norms and behaviors, as identified in our Niger study, such as shifts in elder perceptions of youth capabilities and youth self-efficacy in political engagement.

Suggested Further Reading, by topic

Preventing Violent Extremism with an SBC Approach

Reidy, Ken. "Benevolent Radicalization: An Antidote to Terrorism." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 4 (August 2019): 1–13. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/26756699>.

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Social and Behavioral Change

Prentice, Deborah, and Elizabeth Levy Paluck. "Engineering Social Change Using Social Norms: Lessons from the Study of Collective Action." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 35 (2020): 138–142. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.06.012>.

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Landry, A. P., & Halperin, E. "Intergroup Psychological Interventions: The Motivational Challenge." *American Psychology*. Advanced online publication, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0001289>.

Littman, Rebecca, and Elizabeth Levy Paluck. "The Cycle of Violence: Understanding Individual Participation in Collective Violence." *Advances in Political Psychology* 36, Suppl. 1 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12239>.

Youth and SBC

Ensor, Marisa O. *Securitizing Youth: Young People's Roles in the Global Peace and Security Agenda*. Rutgers University Press, 2021.

USAID and the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS). *A Practitioner's Guide: Using Social and Behavior Change to Increase Youth Leadership and Political Participation*. 2022.

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About the Note

Lauren Van Metre is the Director for Peace, Climate and Democratic Resilience at the National Democratic Institute. Lauren has expertise in community resilience to violence, P/CVE meta-evaluations, and community-based armed groups.

Jasmine Ramsey is the Program Director of Strengthening Democracy at Beyond Conflict. Jasmine has expertise in social inclusion and identity and leads social and behavior change programming at Beyond Conflict.

Opeyemi Adejo is Program Lead at Beyond Conflict, where he leads on the development of research-based behavioral-science informed peacebuilding programs in Nigeria.

Karen Bernstein is the International Peacebuilding Program Director at Beyond Conflict, where she collaborates with behavioral scientists and local partners to design and implement research-based programs to reduce intergroup conflict.

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