

Statement by Mercy Corps at the United Nations High Level Conference on Counter-Terrorism

Session III: Strengthening Global Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, Including by Engaging Youth and Preventing Misuse of New Technologies and the Internet by Terrorists

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak on this important issue. I represent the global organization [Mercy Corps](#). Mercy Corps has spent decades working with youth to reduce violence in fragile contexts across the globe. We have also fielded extensive research on countering violent extremism (CVE) and youth empowerment. I will focus on three issues, informed by our field-based research and programming: 1) partnerships between civil society and governments on CVE; 2) education and civic engagement as tools to equip youth; and 3) the urgent need to address governance gaps that disenfranchise and alienate young people.

I commend the conference organizers for inviting civil society to participate in today's session. However, we cannot leave this conference room and congratulate ourselves for a job well done without committing to a more sustained partnership between governments and civil society on the shared priority of countering violent extremism. In contexts like Yemen, Nigeria, and Somalia, civil society networks need to be partners in developing, overseeing, and implementing transparent and credible CVE efforts, and ensuring local buy-in. The top driver of youth recruitment to extremist organizations is negative experience with security services. Partnerships between local communities, faith leaders, and youth groups are necessary to help security services from creating the exact conditions they are trying to prevent.

The only way we can make progress against an increasingly diffuse and networked counterterrorism threat is by strengthening engagement with local and national civil society actors and tying our diplomatic and security strategies with investments in development interventions that we know work. We offer Member States the opportunity to work with us to better understand and address the root causes of instability - weak governance, corruption, and marginalization - that breed extremism, especially among young people.

Since 2000, a disproportionate majority of the international community's efforts to counter terrorism have focused too heavily on military partnerships, weapons shipments, border security and punitive criminal justice. If we fail to address systemic drivers of conflict, military approaches are unlikely to make progress reducing violence around the world.

Since 2010, Mercy Corps has worked with 3.5 million young people across 33 countries. We reject the myth that idle, jobless youth are inherently violent. Rather, young people are on the cutting edge of turning their societies around. As also documented in the recent progress study on Youth, Peace and Security (UNSCR 2250), youth around the world want to move beyond tribalism, patronage networks, and identity politics. What we need to do as an international community is provide room and opportunities for youth to take the lead in creating this nonviolent change.



Our research from Afghanistan and Somalia instead shows that violent extremist organizations drive recruitment by capitalizing on government voids, unresolved grievances and feelings of injustice. As a young Afghan former fighter told us, “I did not join the Taliban because I was poor. I joined because I was angry.”

There is good news, however. Evidence shows that development interventions can contribute to the prevention of violent extremism.

- In [Afghanistan](#), we found a combination of vocational training and cash transfers led to a 17% decrease in willingness to support armed opposition groups.
- In [Somalia](#), a combination of civic engagement and secondary education reduced youth support for political violence by 64.8%. By offering opportunities for youth to use what they learned to change their communities--through community service or advocacy campaigns--they saw first-hand the positive influence they could have.

While these findings are encouraging, these types of development interventions must be coupled with efforts to address long-standing grievances, including fraught relationships and a lack of trust between communities, on the one hand, and government and security services on the other. We know from our research in Iraq, that improved perception of governance was correlated with reduced support for armed opposition groups. Programs to prevent or counter violent extremism must help youth find alternative, peaceful ways for achieving their ambitions – this includes promoting inclusive governance structures where youth have a voice, financial products that address youth exclusion from economic systems, and opportunities for young people to invest in their communities.

Service providers must empower youth to design and participate in any program targeted at them so these they are truly accessible, remove barriers to their engagement and resolve perceived grievances. Job and civic engagement training must be linked to legitimate opportunities to apply learned skills and participate in economic and political systems. Otherwise, training itself can be counterproductive, first raising hopes then feeding frustrations when opportunities are not realized.

We often talk about “the youth bulge” as a liability - particularly in fragile states, when youth are often the most vulnerable to recruitment into extremist organizations. I challenge us to see the demographic trendlines as an opportunity to equip youth to be the solution to prevent violent extremism, reduce violence, and build stability worldwide.

