Focus Group Discussion Report
Participatory consultation on the role of youth in P/CVE
24 April 2017 - Lahj, Abyan and Aden Governorates

Yemen Stabilisation Programme

Summary:

UNDP conducted Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to assess the role of youth for the Prevention and/or Combating of Violent Extremism (P/CVE), to validate existing knowledge on drivers/factors of VE, and seek action-oriented recommendations from youth on their agency towards peacebuilding and local conflict resolution for PVE/CVE. The consultation focused on the southern governorates of Aden, Lahj and Abyan which have been prioritized by the Yemen Stabilisation Programme, with existing partners that can mobilise youth and other community actors, and where violent extremism is already rooted and expanding.

The FGDs were divided into four groups totaling 30 youth: Abyan-Lahj, Aden (women), Abyan-Lahj, Aden (men). Local NGOs helped UNDP identify youth based on their representativeness and civic engagement in youth-led activities. To respect protection concerns, names of local NGOs who facilitated the identification of youth as well as the specific districts and localities were youth reside will not be stated in this report.

Findings

Most respondents linked VE with the physical demonstration of violence that they have been accustomed to in their communities such as: explosions, suicide bombers, illegal abductions and various other security incidents. VE was less associated with ideas, speech and non-physical manifestations. The facilitators described VE as radical ideas and behaviours which lead to emotional, verbal and physical violence towards others, noting that it may not always be religiously-inspired.

The impact of VE on women and girls as reported by them included the following:

- Women became the head of the household following the death of male providers. This creates a lower access to income and a sense of discrimination;

- Women are restricted to a dress code;
- They are more restricted in their movements and in certain times of the day;
- Some women have left their jobs due to extreme sexual harassment and kidnappings;
- Some women have witnessed domestic abuse by the family head who is part of a violent group;
- Females contributions and voice have become very limited;
- Females are also restricted to certain job families;
- Marriage of young girls has increased;
- Some women are not allowed to study after a certain age;
- VE has made many women to live in fear of losing a family member and created a burden to protect and prevent male members from joining VE groups

This FGD confirmed that other drivers beyond economic incentives play a major role in attracting youth to join groups. Aden participants were more afraid to name groups responsible for security incidents and we observed notable nuances between Abyan, Lahj, Aden and women-men perspectives. In Aden, participants made the difference between AQAP and ISIS suggesting that the latter is constituting a different identity/base for recruitment. Overall, the exposure of youth to violent extremism is significant, and a growing trend following 2015. For Lahj, violent extremism is also associated with formal institutions such as the Security Department, which was surprising and alerts on vetting and accountability principles.

Follow up recommendations:

- Mapping lessons learnt and best practices of initiatives engaged in deradicalisation;
- More in-depth discussions on the positive role that women and girls can play in P/CVE, particularly in the rural areas.

Q1. Have you heard about any explosions or any notable security issues in your area? If yes, who do you think is responsible for these incidents?

Participants are accustomed to manifestations of VE. They described it mainly as i) either residing an area which was occupied by the Houthi-Saleh alliance during 2015, using different types of weapons and snipers against citizens, or ii) by being a neighbour of someone who was illegally abducted and detained from their houses, lastly iii) living in areas affected by terrorist acts such as suicide bombings and explosions.

In Aden, participants mentioned that it was not easy to identify specific groups responsible. It could be from their community, "Northerners", AQAP, ISIS (Daesh), as well as Popular Resistance Committee who gained prominence after the 2015

conflict. In Lahj and Abyan, participants identified AQAP and the Security Department as main VE actors.

Q2. Can you share with us a story of a relative, a friend, a friend of a friend who has joined such groups? What happened and how did it end?

Most of the stories shared by participants were associating to someone joining AQAP. The diversity and number of stories shared gave an indication of participants' exposure.

Story 1: One youth was raped and joined AQAP as he felt the group provided him with a sense of justice. AQAP prosecuted the perpetrators and the rapid found him in jail. This created loyalty. After several years with AQAP, the youth participated to a suicide mission and passed away on the belief that he would join heaven.

Story 2: A mother was raising their children alone as a widow. The family felt marginalized due to the widowhood and lack of income generating opportunities. The eldest brother motivated the younger brother to join AQAP, they both joined and became suicide bombers in a civilian area.

Story 3: AQAP approached a university engineer to use his technical expertise for bomb-making. They came several times and offered USD 10,000 to him during a time where salaries were not being paid for many months. The professor considered joining the group until he shared his idea with a relative who was able to convince him not to join.

Story 4: One youth finished high school waiting to pursue higher education. When the war broke out in 2015, he joined one of the Popular Resistance Committees as many other youth did but after his return home, he started displayed different attitudes that his family considered strange, showing interest in AQAP attacks and propaganda videos encouraging his family to watch. He disappeared from home after a while, mentioning when asked about his whereabouts that he had joined an explosive-making job part of the resistance to stop the Houthi-Saleh advance in Al Baydah Governorate. After he came back from the frontlines, he received a call that a cash transfer had been made to his name at one service point. He received the money, bringing home the AQAP black outfit, said goodbye to his relatives mentioning that he will be joining AQAP and never came home since.

Story 5: In Abyan, one man affiliated to ISIS (Daesh) forced local people to pray under his authority at the mosque. Once, he fired a shot at someone's leg and the next time only one local came to pray with him. The training camp was way up in the mountain.

Q3. Which group do you trust the most for your security? Yemeni Army? Houthis? Local militia? Al Qaeda? Other?

The answers varied between locations and men/women respondents with the latter trusting VE group to some degree as groups providing justice, particularly for women surviving abuses.

Women respondents:
In Abyan, some citizens trust AQAP to provide justice and no other group. In general, AQAP is the most untrusted group since they are the ones promoting VE and have threatened and killed many citizens. In Lahj, citizens would trust the police and police stations if they were active. Currently they do not trust any group, the most hated group is the Security Department as respondents felt they abused of their authority against citizens. In Aden, resistance groups, young men at checkpoints controlled by the security departments and others are trusted to some degree.

Men respondents:
Abyan: we only trust the tribe.
Lahj: we trust no one.
Aden: we trust men at check points, which are militias from within the community. The group analysed that soldiers at check points are the first in line, attacked by AQAP, and they care for the people without receiving salaries. Some respondents in Aden mentioned that they don't trust any group.

Q4. Are young people joining violent extremist groups mainly for economic reasons (i.e. money/salaries)? Do they also join because of other reasons?

The participants mentioned three main underpinning pull factors. First, **poverty**, which causes youth to seek alternative income opportunities and brings loyalty to the VE group since they provide economic support to those disadvantaged. Second pull factor is a sense of **injustice** and absence of rule of law. This was acutely felt by groups who are considered marginalized and that are not under the umbrella of a specific tribe. Injustice as a factor was discussed in length by participants and it was acknowledged as a significant contributor to tipping points, for youth who enjoy relatively well-off living conditions. Lastly, the **vulnerability towards manipulation** and lack of education was reported, with participants observing linkages between illiteracy and propensity of being manipulated with false religious dogma.

Some additional factors/considerations are reported as below:

Economic factors	Rule of law/justice	Psychological vulnerability, low education
In some areas, many families can't afford basic	Absence of rule of law and uncertain security	No sense of belonging to the community

necessities such as food and vital non-food items. If people go hungry, they cannot think rationally and it changes their ideas and behaviours. Delays or suspensions of salary payments has affected both public servants and employees of companies driving many to live in poverty including educated individuals. Some VE groups provide income and livelihoods (i.e. livestock) to those in need to attract them.	situation has a major impact on people's ideas and beliefs. Security functions have been given to unqualified and unsupervised individuals. Security actors have little accountability obligations, abuse their power and some behaviours of Security Belt rank-and-file were deemed improper. Some youth join to enjoy a sense of authority. Substance abuse in some communities drives youth to adopt more violent attitudes. Victims/survivors (marginalization, inequality, discrimination, limited access to education, sexual harassment, denial of rights etc) turn to these groups for justice and redress.	The conflict against the Houthi-Saleh alliance was framed along political and religious views allowing for a counter-narrative to be attractive. VE groups also attract youth on the promise of adventure and freedom. They offer spiritual comfort and a supportive social network. Sudden break with the family and long-standing friendships. Sudden school drop-out and conflict at the school.

Q5. Who are the main groups promoting violent extremist ideas and behaviours? Has it increased after the 2015 war?

Participants divided the VE actors into two categories, 1) those directly promoting physical and psychological violence, and 2) those indirectly promoting VE as a consequence of the 2015 war. All respondents acknowledged that VE significantly increased since 2015, observed through the numerous incidents.

"Direct" promoters of VE include AQAP, ISIS and the Houthi-Saleh alliance. "Indirect" promoters of VE include the Saudi-led Coalition and the Security Department actors.

Q6. Are there certain groups more likely to join extremist groups? Muhamasheen? Minority groups?

The women groups were very responsive to this question. They reported that out of their experience with younger relatives, orphans, uneducated youth, youth between 14-25 years of age, the unemployed, Muhamasheen, and those who were born without legal status (out of wedlock) are those more likely to join extremist groups. For the men groups, they reported mainly those who have faced discrimination, weak characters, the uneducated, youth and children as most vulnerable.

Q7. Which common locations are being used for recruitment/propaganda? Schools? Mosques? Street? Are there community leaders involved in recruitment? Are groups using the radio? Printing leaflets? Social media? Organising meetings? Other communication tools?

All groups mentioned the main recruitment locations to include mosques, qat chewing gatherings, schools and sport camps away from the city or village. Groups have been using food and recreational activities to introduce the achievements of AQAP, how the organization supports Islam and the Muslims to attract youth and children to join.

Friends, mosques leaders/imams and some community leaders are also active in the recruitment strategy, connecting youth to the VE groups and distributing flash disks with propaganda songs, lecture and videos heralding "Jihad". Internet cafes in some areas provide youth with AQAP videos. Youth did not mention social media as a major recruitment platform.

Q8. Do you know examples of youth-led initiatives in your area or nearby that contribute to building peace, resolving conflicts, and preventing/combatting violent extremism?

Youth-led initiatives have increased in some areas. In others, youth were threatened for activities related to awareness-raising and reduced the scope of their engagement.

Women reported awareness raising activities taking place in Aden, using plays and songs to illustrate the negative impact of joining groups on their families and the community. There are also initiatives related to using sports/social activities and art to convey peace building messages to the community. In Lahj and Abyan, initiatives have stopped due to lack of financial resources and receiving numerous threats from AQAP.

The men groups reported self-help or individual initiatives such as youth previously tempted to join AQAP mentoring others to leave the mosque right after prayers not to be at risk of recruitment since there may be "after-prayer groups" convened by AQAP affiliates.

Q9. How can young women and girls lead or support initiatives? Are there existing resources in your community you can use? What external assistance would be needed?

The men interviewed did not acknowledge any role that women and girls could play.

The women noted some of the cultural barriers for a greater and more visible role. In spite of this, they relayed the influence they may bring at the family, neighbourhood and community levels to dissuade those who may be tempted and afford peace-building messages. They see their role mainly in awareness raising within schools and social gatherings.
Women see external assistance to support active Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) in technical and financial management, accessing funds to conduct activities and creating advocacy messages. They also mentioned the needs for assistance in creating a space for them to grow in the community.

Q10. What are some of the interventions that can help PVE?

Participant have categorised interventions supporting P/CVE under two components: 1) youth-led, 2) with support from local authorities.

Youth-led PVE initiatives	PVE initiatives requiring local authority engagement
Raise awareness of the negative impact of joining groups to children and youth adults, mainly in schools	Support youth activities, engaging youth in the society, providing safe and open spaces for them
Foster social and recreational opportunities for youth	Provide vocational training opportunities, small cash grants to create businesses, other training linked with income creation
Provide alternative income opportunities for youth	
	Redynamise qualified local authority members, activate courts and police stations
Raise awareness about discrimination, sexual harassment, and injustice	
	Ban carrying weapons in public places, organise a campaign to close shops selling small arms (latter specific to Aden respondents)

Q11. How to best communicate about deradicalisation in your community? Which channels to use (radio, social media, outreach meetings) and which local actors to engage?

Women mentioned using social media, school plays, lectures at the mosque and radio shows. They recommend engaging imams, active social members and CBOs/NGOs.

Men recommend using the same channels as AQAP and the same actors to promote deradicalisation.

Q12. Which source do you trust the most to receive information?

Both males and females rely on imams, community leaders, INGOs, NGOs and CBOs to receive information. In Aden, respondents also mentioned the local council and 'Aqil al Hara in some neighbourhood. Overall, they trust the source to state an incident, not they do not trust who they say is responsible or the reasons behind any incident.

After the discussion, all participants were grateful for the chance to be able to talk openly and be part of such a sensitive topic. The participants have also showed willingness to provide more information when needed.

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